

Dachima Inaka

Illustration by **Iida Pochi**.

10

DO YOU
LOVE YOUR
MOM
and Her Two-Hit
Multi-Target
Attacks
?

VISIT...

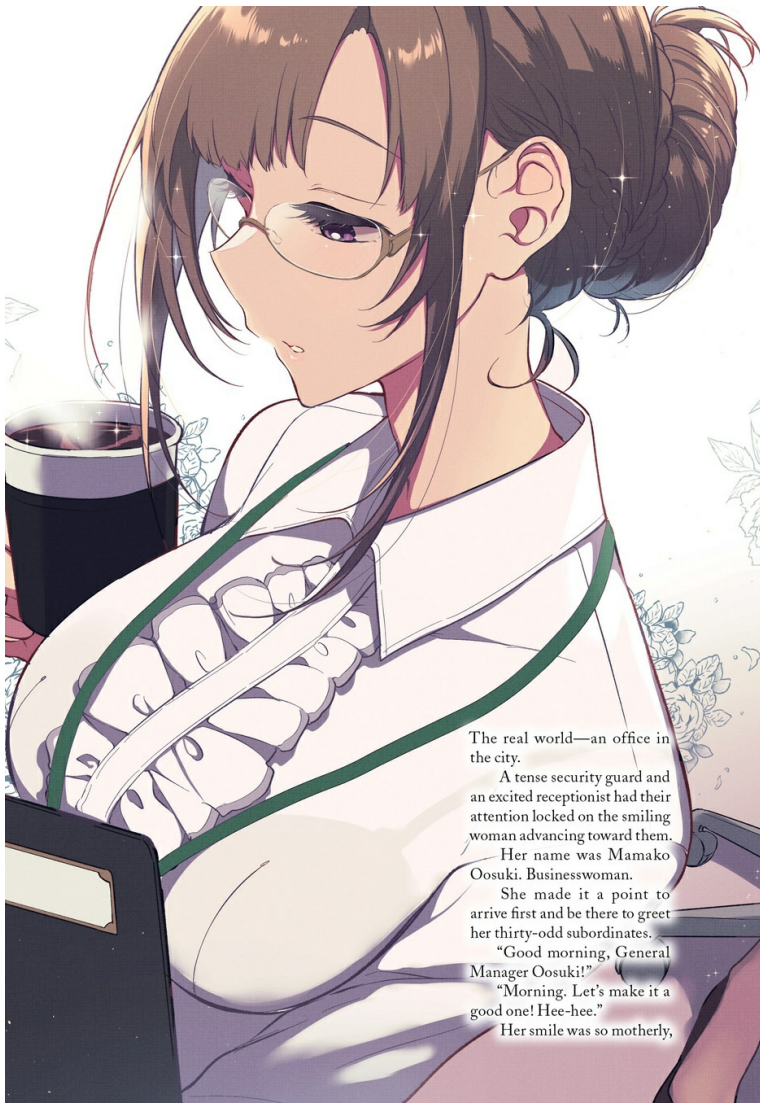
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Dachima Inaka

Illustration by **Iida Pochi.**



Do You Love Your Working Mom?



The real world—an office in the city.

A tense security guard and an excited receptionist had their attention locked on the smiling woman advancing toward them.

Her name was Mamako Oosuki. Businesswoman.

She made it a point to arrive first and be there to greet her thirty-odd subordinates.

"Good morning, General Manager Oosuki!"

"Morning. Let's make it a good one! Hee-hee."

Her smile was so motherly,

it made the workplace feel like home.

But she was there to work. Her mornings were spent at her desk. As she was catching up on e-mails, a phone rang.

A staff member answered, but a cloud soon passed over the woman's face.

"Oh my. What's the matter?" Mamako asked.

"Sales is furious about the delayed project..."

"I see. Let me handle this one. Forward it to me?"

As general manager,

Mamako was the one to resolve these conflicts.

"Hello, Oosuki residence—Oh, dear, I'm answering like I'm at home."

"Ha-ha-ha! Shucks... That makes it hard to stay angry."

Making someone laugh was the best way to defuse a tense conversation.

Noon was always a working lunch, doubling as a meeting with the heads of each division.

The afternoons were filled with more meetings.

"Then we'll go with GM

Oosuki's proposal. That resolves our agenda well ahead of schedule."

"Everyone worked hard to make this happen. Well, I'd better run! ...Hmm, what should I make for dinner? Hee-hee."

Mamako Oosuki handled professional work and housework with equal aplomb.

She was a two-job multitasking all-business mom.

Party Adventures

in the Real World

Wake up, eat breakfast, get ready for school.

As he stepped out the front door...

"You're late, Masato!"

"Making ladies wait is a disgrace for any man."

"Good morning, Masato!"

Three girls—snotty, serene, and sunny—all waiting for him. Masato greeted them while smoothing over his hair.

"Genya, Medhi, Porta—looks like you guys are all here."

"Wha— Masato! How come I'm the only one who gets the real-name treatment? That's not right!"

"When it's just party members, we agreed to use nicknames! That's the after-school Quest Club rule!"

"Albeit a rule Genya made up because she doesn't like her real name."

"Sure, I admit it! But rules are rules, so just call me Wise!"

"Will do. C'mon, Genya, we'd better head out."

"Why, you little—"

Their mornings were always like this: fiery words exchanged between Wise and Medhi, the sparks landing on Masato, Porta hastily trying to put out the resulting blaze.

"Then let's talk about quests. You guys got anything?"

"I do! I need some art supplies to use in class!"

"So a fetch quest... They sell that stuff in the school store, y'know."

"But the stationery store by the train station has a better selection."

"Great, that settles things. Let's get these classes over with and head out on an adventure!"

By turning everyday occurrences into epic quests and clearing them as a party, each day was a delightful adventure all its own.

What has brought you the most joy among all your adventures?

When Ma-kun let me join his party. I thought he was going to be so against it! I was all worried. So when he said I could join, I was just bursting with happiness.

Is there anything you'd like to tell your party members at this point?

I want to say sorry for always hogging the limelight. I just didn't want any of you getting hurt, so I always attacked monsters the moment I saw them, but I think I should have let you all handle some.

Were the monsters adequately powerful?

I think so! I could beat them all just by going "Hyah!" and using normal attacks. ...Oh, but maybe it would have been better if I'd needed the children's help to defeat them? I'm just not sure.

What gave you the most trouble?

Learning all the game terms. Accounts, stats, skills...so many words I'd never used before. I had to use the strategy guide as a dictionary, studying when no one was looking.

How has your son, Ma-kun, grown?

He's grown by leaps and bounds both emotionally and physically. He talks to me now, and we've gotten so close. Not only that, he's grown almost a full inch since our adventure started! Ma-kun's getting more wonderful by the day. Hee-hee-hee.

Is there anything you'd like to see added to the game?

You know how you get SP points when you level up? I think it would be nice if there were points mothers could give their children. Maybe something like Good Child points?

Do you think Shirase (Shiraase) is working too hard?

Yes, admin work is much more difficult than being a test player. All we're doing is having adventures! I think she should make sure to get the rest she needs. Health comes first!

Surveyor: Masumi Shirase

Answers from Mamako Oosuki, Mother



Do You Love Your Mom and Her Two-Hit Multi-Target Attacks?

C O N T E N T S

Prologue

Activation

Chapter 1

**All You Can Eat! The Oosuki Family Rice Bowl,
Topped with Familial Reminiscences!**

Chapter 2

Does MOD Stand for Mom's Overbearing Devotion?

Chapter 3

Adventurers' Respite

Chapter 4

**The Anti-Shoplifting Squad: Mamako's Case File
~Those Who Challenge Mothers~**

Chapter 5

True Story? A Family-and-Party Adventure Documentary

Chapter 6

**Oh, Someone's Here. Who's That?
I Don't Know Them... Or Do I?**

Epilogue

Afterword



Dachima Inaka



VOLUME 10

DACHIMA INAKA

Illustration by IIDA POCHI.



New York

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Dachima Inaka

Translation by Andrew Cunningham

Cover art by Iida Pochi.

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DESUKA? Vol. 10

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Contents

[Cover](#)

[Insert](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Prologue: Activation](#)

[Chapter 1: All You Can Eat! The Oosuki Family Rice Bowl, Topped with Familial Reminiscences!](#)

[Chapter 2: Does MOD Stand for Mom's Overbearing Devotion?](#)

[Chapter 3: Adventurers' Respite](#)

[Chapter 4: The Anti-Shoplifting Squad: Mamako's Case File *Those Who Challenge Mothers*](#)

[Chapter 5: True Story? A Family-and-Party Adventure Documentary](#)

[Chapter 6: Oh, Someone's Here. Who's That? I Don't Know Them... Or Do I?](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Yen Newsletter](#)

Prologue Activation

Tokyo. Chiyoda Ward. Nagata District. Central Government Building No. 8, interior.

On this day blessed with clear skies, a joint session was held with the aim of moving the government-sponsored *MMMMMMORPG* (working title) toward its official launch.

The attendees were an imposing lineup of cabinet officials leading the project and executives handling project financing and administration.

Porta's mother, Saori Hotta, was present as a producer, representing the Planning and Development Division. She looked very stressed-out and was seated at the far end of the business side, making herself very small. Given the lineup of political and economic big shots around her, this was a natural reaction.

But some people didn't let these things get to them.

"As previously reported, all beta testing has been completed as scheduled, and all that remains is the final test phase. My name is Shirase, and *shirase* means 'inform'—and accordingly, I am here to inform you that obtaining permission to launch the final test is the primary goal of this meeting."

Given her track record in-game and her unflappable calm, Shirase had been tasked with running this meeting. She didn't hesitate to throw in an untranslatable pun—nobody laughed, but she didn't seem to care.

The attendees coughed, breaking the awkward silence, and began chattering among themselves.

"Completed as scheduled? Well...certainly, it wrapped up by the scheduled date."

"I've heard rumors there were...incidents, but no lasting problems?"

"It's become a model case for workplace reform. The cabinet has no further objections."

“All’s well that ends well. I’ve heard you’re able to spend more time with your daughter now? Good for you, Ms. Hotta.”

“Th-thanks...”

Saori had already shrunk so much, any further shrinkage seemed likely to make her disappear entirely. But before she did, a new voice rang out.

“If I might have your attention.”

The speaker was on the business side of the table. He was in his forties—but surrounded by all these aging executives, he appeared even younger. One hand raised, he had a pleasant smile on his lips.

His official role here was “management consultant.”

“While run under the auspices of the government, this is essentially a voluntary sector project. We must be concerned not only with the political image and business finances, but with the all-pressing concerns about the impact on our country’s very future. This project cannot afford to fail. We’re all agreed on this point, yes?”

He glanced around the room, making sure everyone was nodding.

“This service will be an integral aspect of life in our country. The benefits go far beyond mere preservation of family ties.”

“True. The physical transportation of the user’s body allowed by the full-dive format has countless potential applications. Essentially, it will enable us to expand our country’s territory without causing any environmental damage.”

“It can serve as a replacement location for any number of activities rendered impractical by environmental decline and help with disaster evacuations—the potential is enormous. We should move swiftly to a nationwide deployment.”

“I’m glad we all agree. Which means, Ms. Shirase...”

“I am well aware. In order for that future to arrive, we must first make the official launch a success, as planned. A hit game enjoyed by parents and children alike where the microtransactions provide the funding necessary for future developments.”

“No need to inform us of such prosaic considerations.”

“Oops! The truth slipped out. Tee-hee-hee.”

Shirase bowed, clearly not remorseful in the least. She quickly assumed a grave expression.

“Then back to the matter of the final test. Management has been working hard reviewing the pool of candidates to take it on. We’ve narrowed it down to one family, and I’d like to introduce them to you.”

“You’ve finally made up your minds? Who are they?” the consultant asked.

Shirase shot him a meaningful smile and got the projector ready.

Saori slipped out of her seat and dimmed the lights. The screen on the far wall lit up.

“Just as a picture is worth a thousand words, these scenes of their actions in-game will tell you everything you need to know. Please enjoy.”

A highlight reel began playing.

On-screen, Mamako and Masato were walking side by side.

No sooner did they appear...

“...What?”

...than the pen fell from the consultant’s hand.



Chapter 1 All You Can Eat! The Oosuki Family Rice Bowl, Topped with Familial Reminiscences!

He glanced up, and the sun was reaching its zenith.

Almost noon—and almost time for lunch.

But in front of him, the field was absolutely swarming with monsters.

“Eep! There’s so many! It’s like we stumbled into a monster nest!”

“Oh my! This will never do. And we were so close to town!”

“Sheesh, what a pain. Let’s take ’em out!” *Grrr.*

“I’ll show you what a starving Sage can do!” *Foosh.*

“Serves you right for standing between us and food! No mercy!” *Rumble.*

Mamako’s smile stiffened a little as the three hungry teens charged.

The monsters in their path were, for some reason, living fruits. First attack!

“How dare you look so tasty?! I’m gonna cook your asses real good!”

The Hero, Masato, unleashed a mighty swing with the Holy Sword, Firmamento. A slash of starvation!

It struck a floating melon monster right in the rind, splitting it in twain!

“Ha! I oughta scoop the seeds out and fill this thing with ice cream!”

“Yeah, yeah, all you did was cut it in half, nothing to brag about. That’s not cooking! *This is.*”

The Sage, Wise.

“*Spara la magia per mirare... Fuoco Fiamma! And! Fuoco Fiamma!*”

She chain cast, sending out two layers of white-hot flame. The apple-shaped monsters flitting through the air were double-grilled! The sweet scent of their sizzling flesh proved tantalizing.

“Mwa-ha-ha! How do you like them roasted apples?! See? Now that’s what

you call *roasting* an enemy!”

“Argh...I hate to admit it, but you did literally cook them! I guess you win this one, Wise.”

“Not so fast. Feast your eyes on what I’ve cooked up.”

““Erp?!””

The Cleric, Medhi, stepped forward—eyes tightly shut.

“I can feel it... I know who wants me to cook them—you! Rah!”

Medhi’s specialty was healing—but her blunt attacks were her real charm.

She put her back into that swing of her staff and scored a critical hit on a watermelon monster rolling toward them.

Its flesh splattered everywhere.

“That felt good! My dish will be... Huh?”

“Not much use splitting the watermelon if there’s nothing left to eat,” said Masato. “That’s the opposite of cooking...”

“Medhi’s an avant-garde chef, and her culinary efforts always end in ruination.”

The green rind had shattered, and the red flesh had erupted, spraying all around.

It looked like a crime scene. Her party members hastily averted their eyes—and so did the other fruit-shaped monsters.

There were still a *lot* of those.

“This is no time for games! Let’s end this fight, get to town, and eat! So, uh... with great reluctance...”

“Hee-hee! It’s Mommy’s turn!”

Mamako had been ready and waiting for Masato to glance her way. With her usual beatific smile.

“Let’s get cooking! *Hyah!*”

Mamako attacked, gently swinging her two Holy Swords.

Altura, the Holy Sword of the Ocean, went first. It generated beautiful clean water, washing all the fruit monsters—bananas, grapes, and pineapples alike.

Then Terra di Madre, the Holy Sword of Earth, activated. Stone spikes appeared from the ground—also thoroughly washed—and struck their targets.

In an instant, all fruits were peeled, the bunches were broken apart, and they were diced for ease of consumption.

They landed in bowls of flowing water—and the dish was complete.

The horde of fruit monsters became a fruit salad!

“Here you are! Dig in! Hee-hee-hee.”

“That’s a pretty lavish dessert... Still, they *were* monsters originally, so...not eating ’em,” said Masato.

“True that. Sadly, they aren’t edible,” agreed Wise.

The fruit salad was certainly colorful and *looked* tasty enough, but—it was just a bunch of dismembered monster parts. They were already starting to turn into dust.

A few moments later, they were gone—and the bowl was filled with colorful gems.

“Man, even the gems are looking kinda tasty right now...” Wise began drooling.

“Like little fruit gummies. Please, Wise, try one,” said Medhi.

“Wait, don’t do that! I know they look tasty, but you can’t eat—!” *Growl*.

At this point, Porta was interrupted by a cute little growl from her stomach. “Whoa!” she squealed, turning beet red. She slapped her hands over her belly, trying to quiet it.

Masato would have loved nothing more than to bask in the spectacle of this adorableness, but he was a gentleman, and he put his hands over his ears, pretending he hadn’t heard.

“Okay, everyone! It’s time for our twice-a-week dining out! Let’s not eat the gems but cash ’em in and order whatever desserts we like! How’s that sound,

Mom?”

“Yes, that does sound good. Do you mind, Porta?”

“R-right! Gathering gems is my job! Leave it to—” *Growl.*

Her belly let out another adorable growl, and she turned red again.

And the gentleman in her party pretended not to notice once more.

The party reached the town safely—no old-school random encounters every step in *this* game.

The town was a nameless rest stop. Plain wooden buildings, dirt roads—your typical farming village.

But there was a solid row of shops, and a sizable number of villagers and adventurers were passing by. Pretty bustling.

Scoping the town out, they found a street with plenty of restaurants.

“...Hmm? Weird—are they all fixing leaks?”

As far as Masato could see, every roof was under repair. That was concerning, but...

The smells were too much for his empty stomach.

“We should choose a place for lunch. Anyone have a suggestion?” said Mamako.

“Uh, yeah...I’m in the mood for—”

But before Masato could finish...

“Knock it off already!”

“How about *you* knock it off?!”

There was a crowd in the street, and two people were in the midst of a heated argument.

One was a girl in eye-catching exotic dance garb like that of a belly dancer. She looked a little older than Masato, but physically she was a good match for Wise.

The other was a Japanese-looking woman, wearing an apron over a kimono.

She appeared to be in her forties.

Yelling was clearly not enough for either; they were adding headbutts to the mix as well.

“I’m gonna give it to you straight: The very sight of your antique ass disgusts me! You’re bad for business!”

“That’s my line! That lurid outfit is beyond the pale! Change out of it this instant!”

“Visual interest is vital to any restaurant’s success these days! It’s not a difficult concept to grasp!”

“It’s the flavor that matters! That’s all we need to succeed!”

“Could you be any less stubborn?! I can’t stand this! Talking to you’s a complete waste of time! Hmph!”

“You’re the one who caused this big scene in the middle of the lunch rush! Hmph!”

Fuming, the two women turned their backs on each other and stalked off into shops on opposite sides of the street.

One restaurant was small but lavishly decorated, like some maharaja’s palace.

The other was totally ordinary, like any other in-game restaurant.

“God, my mom is so—mm?”

The belly dancer saw Masato’s party coming.

And she pounced like a starving beast. “Grr!” “Yikes?!” Her charge was every bit as heated as theirs against the fruit foes from earlier.

“You’re coming to my shop, right?! Say you are!”

“Um...I-I’m sure there’s plenty of other people who’d like to... Huh?!”

But even as Masato spoke, the crowd scattered like spiders, fleeing the girl’s ferocity.

Worse...

“Ooh, I smell curry! Oh, now I want some!”

“Mom! Don’t—if you say that, she’ll—”

“Best curry in town, right this way! Table for five!”

“Aughhhh...!”

They were dragged into the maharaja’s restaurant with such force that a simple “No” was clearly not an option.

They stepped through the door, buffeted by the décor and aromas.

Sniffing the spices, they were greeted by a massive elephant statue. The interior was hardly spacious, but the walls were draped in tapestries, paisleys, and mandalas—definitely hard selling that exotic vibe.

But there were no other customers—possibly because she’d just had a huge argument in front of her shop.

This girl appeared to be the sole employee and was thrilled to have the party there.

“Welcome! I’m Raja, the owner of this shop! I’ll serve you, body and soul! Have a seat here! I’ll go get you some water.”

“Uh, sure, thanks...”

Raja went off, hips wriggling (like a belly dance), and Masato’s eyes— “Ma-kun?” “I’m not staring!” Having your mom with you was hard. He settled on staring at the ceiling. It was also covered in paisley patterns.

They were led to a round table near the kitchen. They took seats around it—Masato, Mamako, Wise, Medhi, then Porta.

“Well, I’m definitely hungry, and curry’s good with me. Let’s eat and move on. Without sticking our necks into this mess.”

“Hmm...that sure seemed like a family squabble, though.”

“Raja did call the other lady ‘Mom,’ so I think Wise is right,” said Medhi.

“I wonder if something happened between them!” said Porta. “I’m really curious!”

“Yes. And when families are having problems... Ma-kun, what say we at least listen?”

Everyone was staring at Masato. Expectantly.

“*Sigh*... Fine. After we eat. If I feel like it.”

This was clearly going to be more than just a meal, but the meal came first.

He reached for the menu, intending to order quickly...

Saag. Sambar. Dal. Korma.

Rows of words he'd never seen before.

“Uh...sorry, Raja, isn't this a curry shop?”

“It *is* a curry shop! *Curry* isn't the name of a single dish! There's all kinds of curries out there! Let me walk you through them.”

Raja placed their waters in front of them.

Saag was a curry made from leafy vegetables like spinach.

Sambar was a soup curry with stewed seasonal vegetables.

Dal was a curry made from stewed beans and ranged in consistency from a paste to a soup.

Korma was a curry with yogurt, coconut, and spices.

Although they were appreciative of Raja's explanation, it didn't make their choice any easier.

“I get the gist, but...”

“I can't really imagine what they taste like...”

“It's so difficult to choose...”

“Which one is the least spicy...?”

Everyone was scowling at their menus, getting nowhere.

Except Mamako.

“Why don't we just order all of them and share?”

“Oh!” “Yes!” “Let's do that!” “Please!”

“You got it! They all come with rice and *naan*!”

Really, an obvious solution.

A proper meal at a proper restaurant...meant eating with the thumb, forefinger, and middle finger of your right hand alone. True elegance was achieved by moving nothing below the second joint.

But who cared about that? Left hands and spoons were all good.

“Let’s dig in! ...Whoa, the *saag* is great! This food’s really second to none—no, second to *naan*!”

Masato looked up to find the girls glaring at him. “...Sorry.” Always important to own your failures.

“The *sambar*’s delicious,” said Wise. “Veggies are stewed to perfection... It’s kinda like miso soup, in a way.”

“The *dal* is very nice. Bean curry—so healthy,” said Medhi.

“The *korma* isn’t too spicy, so I can eat it just fine!” chirped Porta. “I like it!”

“Oh my! Porta, you have curry—I mean, *korma*—on your cheek. Goodness, Ma-kun, you’ve got *saag* on yours! Hold still.”

“Lay off! I can wipe it myself!”

Rice and *naan* mingled with each type of curry on their tongues.

Led by their appetites, they inhaled the meal.

Full up, they were left basking in the afterglow, and Raja brought out post-meal drinks for everyone. Glasses full of a white beverage.

“This is called *lassi*. Nothing goes better with curry!”

“Oh, I’ve heard of that! It’s made from yogurt, right?”

Masato took a gulp, and the faintly tart sweetness washed away the lingering bite of the curry, the perfect finish to the meal. Definitely the right choice.

“Whoa, this is addicting.”

“Glad to hear it. Let’s get you hooked on curry and turn you into a regular! You’re welcome here anytime!”

Raja’s outfit might have been a bit much, but her smile was unadorned and

genuine. She cleared away their dishes and vanished behind the counter.

Masato watched her go, and Mamako poked him in the arm.

“Ma-kun, maybe it’s time?”

“Argh...you didn’t forget that, huh?”

He really didn’t feel up to it. “Ma-kun?” “Ugh, fine.” He couldn’t just let Mamako poke him all day.

“Raja, I know you’re busy washing dishes, but do you have a minute to talk?”

“Oh, sure. What is it?”

“We saw you arguing with the lady across the street...”

He’d intended to ask about the cause of that fight...

But before he could, he heard a plate shatter.

Raja had a smile on her lips but was literally shaking with rage, and the vein on her brow looked ready to pop.

“Really? I have *no idea* who you’re talking about.” *Throb, throb.*

“Okay, sure, done here. Sorry.”

Nope. Asking more would just cause an explosion.

His party went into a huddle, whispering.

“Safety first. We’ll have to speculate... So the lady across the street has to be Raja’s mom.”

“And I’m pretty sure they’re test players. Judging by their outfits,” said Wise.

“A belly dancer outfit and a kimono... Definitely not the kinds of clothes we’ve seen anywhere else in-game... Porta, what do you make of it?” asked Medhi.

“Neither outfit is ordinary gear! High odds they’re both a starting bonus!”

“That means... Ma-kun?”

“Yeah, yeah, okay. We can’t just do nothing. Argh...”

Not if they were test players. A real-life mother and daughter.

They must have made noncombat, cooking-centric accounts, and opened

shops in-game.

“And that means the reason they’re fighting...”

“Parents and kids fight all the time! I mean, me and my mom sure did.”

“Yeah, and the reason they split up and aren’t working together is just like you and your mom, Wise: going against the goals of the game and making trouble for everyone.”

“Ugh, I dug my own grave there...”

“Which means we definitely need to help, but to do that, we need more info... and it doesn’t seem like Raja’s inclined to answer. Should we head across the street and ask there?”

“Oh? You’re gonna visit the other shop? I see! Well, before you leave, make sure you pay your tab!”

Bam.

Raja was suddenly right next to them, slamming the check down on the table. And the total came to: 500,006,000 mum

Five hundred million. Six thousand mum.

“Each customer that crosses the street gets a hundred-million-mum surcharge.”

“Even for a scam, that’s nuts.”

“You don’t have to pay! All you gotta do is promise you’ll never enter her shop, and I’ll drop the bill to only six thou. What d’ya say?”

“U-understood. In that case...”

Masato nervously glanced around the party then nodded.

“Let’s say we pay the six thousand up front...and Wise and Medhi will work here until the rest is paid up,” he declared.

Like a proper hero.

They’d been left with little choice.

His back to Raja’s shop, Masato began making his way across the street.

“Masatooooooooooooo! You’ll pay for thiiiiiiiiiiiis!”

“This is unacceptable! I can’t believe I’m working off debts *again!*”

“No running away, girls! Back to the shop, and change into your uniforms.”

Wise and Medhi were dragged bodily back inside.

It was hard to watch. But this was their only option.

The appalled looks Mamako and Porta were giving him were hard to bear, yet Masato remained resolute.

“We have a mission: Uncover the problem between these two, and resolve it. I’ve assigned the girls the vital task of buying us the time to do that.”

“I—I do want to help Raja and her mother...”

“But is this really okay...?”

“It is. I’ve made my decision. Porta, Mom—neither of you could make this choice. Only I can. Because I’m the Hero.”

Putting it that way felt good.

Wise and Medhi would definitely get him back later...and that was terrifying. He was crying already.

“But it’s okay! If we can solve this problem, everything’ll fall into place. We just have to focus on the task at hand.”

“...Well, all right. I’m sure they’ll both do their best.”

“We’ll talk to the mom and fix this!”

“Yep! Come on! Raja’s mom’s shop is right over here!”

It was across the street, so it was literally only a few steps away.

It looked exactly like any other in-game restaurant.

The interior was the same: just your standard Western-style tables. The argument earlier had left the place equally deserted.

As they stepped through the door, the lady in the kimono and apron greeted them—her vibe at total odds with the décor. Definitely the woman Raja had been arguing with.

“Welcome. Table for three? Do sit down.”

“Uh, yeah, thanks.”

For now, they acted like regular customers. The three of them took over a table meant for four.

“Okay, first...we oughta order something.”

“No need. Anyone who’s visited the shop across the street is automatically served the Owner’s Whim Set. Just wait right here!”

She smiled pleasantly, placed the check on the table, and retreated into the kitchen.

Masato picked up the check.

Whim x 3: 300,000,000

They were being charged a hundred million each. For a whim.

“...She’s definitely Raja’s mom. This proves it. They act exactly alike.”

“Oh my. I suppose this means I’ll have to work!”

“I can help! Now we’ll be just like Wise and Medhi!”

“That’s not— Uh, let’s try and avoid that predicament. If we can get some info from her and fix the problem, then—”

“Here you are!”

The lady was back faster than expected. Carrying a tray with three dishes, which she set out before them.

First, *shiratama anmitsu*: diced agar, boiled red peas, *shiratama* dumplings, and red bean jam, with plenty of syrup on top. A dish with all your classic Japanese-style sweets in it.

Next was *kuzukiri*: kudzu powder dissolved in water, chilled, sliced like *udon*, and served in black syrup.

Finally, *mizu yokan*: red bean paste mixed with agar and solidified—this type used more water and was softer.

Three dishes total.

“Since you already ate across the street, I went with dessert.”

“That’s a big help, actually. But they’re each a hundred million mum?”

“They are.”

“We can’t get you to price that more reasonably...?”

“Nope.”

Her smile was pleasant, but she brooked no argument. They weren’t getting anywhere.

Still waters run deep, and so did this lady’s fury. Masato’s attempt at diplomacy had failed.

And so...

“Then why don’t we have a little mom-to-mom chat, and if you feel a bit better, you can lower the price accordingly! What do you say?”

Mamako took over the negotiations. Cutting in with a smile.

And the results...

“...Well, mom-to-mom, I suppose we do have things to discuss.”

Their opponent yielded. A path opened!

Apparently when mothers collide, a sympathetic effect occurs...

“Mama, is this a new skill?”

“A special mom skill? No, an ordinary Mom Link! One that activates automatically when two moms meet!”

That’s how moms worked. This was a standard skill all of them had.

The woman went in back and came out with a mug of tea.

She sat down on the empty seat and took a sip. Then she let out a long sigh and began talking.

“My name is Yuzuki. Loath as I am to admit it, I’m the mother of that problem child calling herself Raja, dressing like a dancer and running a curry shop.”

“I—I see. I’m...not sure what to say.”

It was awfully difficult to maintain a conversation with someone who looked noticeably older than his own mother.

So Masato glanced at Mamako. “Hee-hee, leave this to me.” “Take it away.” Thank God his mom was with him.

“Well, I suppose we should introduce ourselves! My name is Mamako Oosuki. And—”

“Her son, Masato. I’m afraid I have a bad habit of not saying anything when I eat *mizu yokan*.”

“I’m Porta! And, uh...I don’t talk much when I’m eating *anmitsu*.”

“How nice to meet you all. Go ahead and eat up. The truth is, I’ve read about your exploits in the magazines, Mamako. I knew who you were from the start. I’ve heard you solve family problems.”

“I can be a bit of a busybody, I must admit... Would you mind telling us what you were fighting about?”

“Not at all. I’d be only too happy to share.”

Mamako and Yuzuki began a mom talk.

Meanwhile, Masato and Porta focused on eating. “Oh, this is good!” “Very!” Each attended to the task they were best suited for.

“Back in the real world, I run a little restaurant out of my home.”

“Oh, how lovely!”

“It’s nothing fancy. My great-grandmother started it, so it’s rather old now, and we’ve been discussing whether it was time to rebuild the place. And then...”

“Something happened?”

“My daughter was attending culinary school. She said old-fashioned Japanese food was out, and we should start a proper curry restaurant instead. That’s where this whole thing started.”

“You can’t just change a shop that’s been like that for generations...”

“Exactly! But my daughter doesn’t give a damn about *that*. Just said whatever

she pleased. She'd come in yelling during business hours—it was pandemonium.”

That sounded pretty bad, but...

Man.

“...That *anmitsu* looks good.”

“It is! Try some, Masato!”

“Thanks! In return, have a bite of my *yokan*. Say ‘Ahh!’”

“Ahh!”

He popped a piece of *yokan* into Porta's little mouth, and a smile blossomed across her face. “Thank you!” “That smile's all the thanks I need.” Masato felt rewarded! (Not in a weird way.) The mom talk was reaching its crux.

“One of our regulars saw us going at it and told us about this game. Said we could have an adventure together and bond.”

“So that's how you wound up here?”

“That's what we put on the application. But...that was a bit of a lie.”

“Oh?”

“From the get-go, we planned to set up our shops in competition and see which of us did better. Then we'd decide what to do with the real-world shop based on the outcome.”

A real family throw down. Raja and Yuzuki putting it all on the line.

Masato had been listening quietly, but this spoke to his love of combat, and he found himself leaning forward.

“Oh! Rather than merely patching things up, you both stood your ground, plunging into the game world to settle things once and for all! That's what I'm talking about!”

“I just can't stop myself from nagging her, which leads to these big arguments. But neither of us have forgotten our real purpose.”

“I see...then...”

“This is a battle between mother and daughter! We shouldn’t get in the way!” said Porta.

“Yeah, I agree. Right, Mom?”

“Hmm. I see your point, but...hmm...”

Mamako seemed significantly less sure.

“We assumed there was a problem since they weren’t together, but in this case, we gotta leave them to it. Or...wait. But then...”

If they just let Raja and Yuzuki work out their own issues in due time...

Then there’d be no quick fix, and the curry debt wasn’t going anywhere. Wise and Medhi might be stuck in indentured servitude...

A pretty big deal reduced to an idle thought.

...Grrrooowwwwlll...

Then they heard a strange noise from outside.

Yuzuki leaped to her feet.

“That sound...that’s it! It’s time! Mamako, Porta, can you lend a hand?”

“...Uh, so not me?”

Yuzuki’s request was...

Ten minutes later...

Outside Yuzuki’s shop stood Yuzuki, Mamako, Porta...and also Masato.

The ladies were all in kimonos and aprons. The mothers had their sleeves bound up in battle-ready fashion, and the little mascot girl, in all her cuteness, was being held high up in the air...however.

The mood from the shop opposite suggested this was not the time or the place.

“Masato, you twit! Time to meet your maker!”

“You’ll pay for selling us off like mere chattel!”

“Can’t believe you’d pick the other side! For shame!”

Wise, Medhi, and Raja were lined up, in silky belly dancer uniforms. Their eyes like daggers. Even Raja's!

Each outfit was striking. There was some range, but definitely sexy all around. It certainly drew the eye...but if he met any girl's gaze, she seemed liable to bite.

Surrounding these two camps were the neighbors—cooks, servers, and customers alike. People pressed up against the windows, looking nervous.



“What’s going on? Yuzuki? Can we get a briefing?”

“This town is sometimes visited by the Legendary Gourmet. Satisfying him is the highest honor a chef can achieve. And his reviews guarantee success to come.”

“I see. So you’re aiming to settle this battle by securing his seal of approval?”

“I am. The timing couldn’t be better. With Mamako and Porta helping, my victory is assured!”

“And I’m of no use to anyone,” grumbled Masato. “Granted, I can’t help cook, so that’s fair, but...”

“A contest between mother and child... I’m just not sure this is for the best.”

Yuzuki might be placing her bets on Mamako, but Mamako’s smile looked uneasy.

That’s not to say she wasn’t motivated, but...there were definitely some doubts.

Then, from across the way, a carriage appeared—gaudily festooned with golden ornaments of various foodstuffs. On the roof was a well-built elderly gentleman.

There was no earthly reason not to ride inside like a normal person, but he was standing—legs apart, arms folded—on the roof.

“What ho! It is I, the gourmet of legend! Gary Hunn!”

A stomach growl rang out like a fanfare, heralding his arrival.

“Offer up a dish that can satisfy my appetites!”

Gary Hunn snapped his fingers. Kitchen counters materialized in the street outside Yuzuki’s and Raja’s shops. All the utensils and seasonings you could ask for. Piles of ingredients, and empty plates waiting to be filled.

“Make whatever you wish and as much as you like. You there, boy too lazy to help! The signal, please.”

“It’s not like I don’t want to hel—argh, fine. Start cooking!”

Everyone sprang into action.

Outside Raja's shop, Wise and Medhi were carrying bottles of spices.

"Let's do this, Medhi! I'll even let *you* cook, just this once!"

"Leave it to me! I'll whip up something just for Masato!"

A big tureen. "Think this is curry powder?" Wise asked Medhi, who replied, "Like I can tell." "Kay, in it goes!" Dumping in spice after spice...

"Yo, back up! You're not cooking for me! This is for Gary Hunn!"

"I feel a slight chill... Very well! Young man, you shall be the first to sample the girls' dish."

"Wait, why?! You're kidding?!"

"I'll make a separate dish for the Legendary Gourmet! These two are cooking something just for you, Masato."

"*Et tu*, Raja?!"

One burner had an anti-Masato weapon, and Raja was commanding the rest of the counter.

She carefully carried in four smaller pans, placing them on the fire. She didn't have time to stew from scratch, so she was using what she had ready.

The *naan*, too, had already risen. Tugging the edges of it, she ran a roller over the dough, getting it ready to fry.

Gary Hunn hadn't exactly provided a tandoor (traditional clay oven), but with a Sage capable of grilling both sides at once with magic, they'd make do.

Meanwhile, on the Yuzuki side...

"Let's get started! First, fill the deep fryer with oil, and put it on the flame. Then Mamako and I will prep the ingredients."

"Understood. I'll do my best!"

"Porta, can you get some cold water ready?"

"Yes! Leave it to me! I can make cold water with Item Creation!"

They were using shrimp, squid, eggplant, and lotus root.

They shelled the shrimp and yanked the veins. The squid was sliced thick and scored. The vegetables were cut to bite-size. Prep complete!

Porta had the cold water ready.

“Fresh, chilly water, all done! Here you go!”

“Thank you! Next, let’s get the batter ready.”

Eggs and water, with a secret ingredient: grated Japanese mountain yam. Finally, a little wheat flour.

Just a pinch or two sprinkled over the top and gently mixed in.

“Mamako, how’s the oil?”

“Yes...I think it’s just about ready!”

Mamako had dipped the ends of her cooking chopsticks in the batter and tested the oil with that.

The batter sank halfway down and soon surfaced. The oil was hot—likely 350 degrees at the very least.

“Good! I’ll take it from here!” said Yuzuki. “And I’ll win this fight!”

A little flour on the ingredients then dunked in the batter, and into the oil they went.

As they cooked, Yuzuki scattered more batter over them with the cooking chopsticks.

This was a technique known as “blooming the flower.”

“...Now!”

With flawless timing, she pulled them out and laid them on the tempura paper.

The dish was complete!

“This is from the menu at Yuzuki Eatery—tempura!”

Yuzuki proudly held aloft a tray of beautifully bloomed tempura. Sounded like she’d named herself after her own restaurant.

But at almost the same time...

“Done! The star of my shop’s menu, the four-curry set!”

Saag, sambar, dal, and korma. A luxury set that let you try all the curries Raja had toiled over.

Last but not least, of course...

“And we’ve made... Uhhh... Well, sure, let’s just say it’s done.”

“Sure. The only person eating this is Masato anyway.”

Wise and Medhi were staring down at some wriggling black thing in their tureen.

Masato ignored them completely.

“Both dishes are complete, then? Very well!” Gary Hunn leaped down from the carriage roof and snapped his fingers once more. An unnecessarily weighty-looking iron table appeared, ready for the sampling.

The moment of fate.

“Outta the way!” *Donk.*

“Who shoves their mother?! What is wrong with you?”

“Can’t hear you! Come on and judge my dish!”

Yuzuki had finished a few seconds earlier, but with one push, Raja got her dish tabled first. The four-curry set was laid out in front of Gary Hunn.

The gourmet himself had watched all of this and elected to focus on the meal in front of him.

“Let us begin,” he said.

He began tearing off pieces of *naan*, dunking them in each type of curry, and eating.

“...Ho...!”

His eyes went wide, and he let out an impressed breath.

He ate more, getting faster and faster, until he’d devoured the entire tray.

A magnificent bit of gluttony. The crowd watching was blown away.

“Uh...think we might already have a victor crowned here?” said Masato.

“Totally! I mean, look at him go! Yes! I’ve finally beat my mom!”

“Oh, Masatooo...you’ve got a dish waiting for you... Mwa-ha-ha...”

“Wise, there’s a problem. Our dish just sprouted a bunch of legs and ran away!”

“Yeah, that’s no longer food. Just let it go. We’ll put up an extermination quest at the Adventurers Guild later. More importantly...”

“Sampling complete!”

It was time for the verdict.

Everyone gulped. Gary Hunn paused dramatically...

“It was undoubtedly excellent...but not the food I seek!”

And with that, he flipped the table, the entire iron thing rocketing into the air above, higher and higher—and falling directly on Raja’s shop.

“Er...wait, wait, wait! Nooooooooo!”

The iron table scored a direct hit. It went right through the ceiling, and the destructive cacophony rocked the very ground.

The exterior walls somehow remained standing, but the shop she’d spent so much time designing was clearly done for.

“The punishment reserved for those who fail to satisfy me! This is how I roll!”

“Geez, so violent! ...Hang on—is this why all the roofs in town are under repair...?” Masato asked.

Either way, Raja’s dish had failed to please Gary Hunn.

“I—I was so sure I’d win... Augh!”

“Yes, yes, quite a shame. My turn now! Outta the way.” *Donk.*

Now it was Yuzuki’s turn to shove Raja aside. The iron table appeared again, and the tempura was placed on it.

“Hmm...well, let’s see here.”

Gary Hunn's sampling began.

He sprinkled on a little salt and tried the shrimp, squid, eggplant, and lotus root in turn. Another magnificent act of gluttony.

"Oh, looks like it's going well. Think we can get a high score?" Masato wondered aloud.

"Heh-heh! I'm certain of it. Victory is mine! I win the family fight!"

"Tch...no way...I can't be losing to my mother...!"

Certain she'd won, Yuzuki let out a smug peal of laughter, definitely loud enough for Raja to hear.

But...

"Sampling complete! Another excellent dish...but not right!"

The iron table was flung into the air once more, scoring a meteor strike on Yuzuki's shop.

Raja and Yuzuki were left staring at their roofless shops, stunned.

It was almost evening. They both should be readying themselves for the dinner rush, but clearly—that was the last thing on the agenda.

Someone was crying.

"Sniffle... I wanted Masato to eat that! I worked so hard!"

"Sniff... It's not too late. Masato, go catch it and have a taste."

"Not happening. Gimme a break here. I'm sorry I forced you to work off our debts."

Teenage girls could hold a grudge, but their crocodile tears were not worth paying attention to.

Gary Hunn had been watching the mother and daughter chefs, and he let out a long sigh.

"I had such hopes," he said. "But once again, the food I seek, the meal that shall truly satisfy me...eludes my tongue's grasp."

"That takes care of that, then. We'll just hit the road...or I guess not."

There was a bustling noise behind him.

Mamako and Porta were at the kitchen counter by Yuzuki's shop.

"Right, Porta, get me another pot of cold, cold water, like before. We've got to make a lot of this!"

"Okay! Leave it to me!"

Mamako was battering sliced potatoes and frying them in oil heated to roughly 338 degrees (a little less than your standard tempura).

After a few minutes, Masato began to recognize the scent.

That's... Oh, I get it.

Pretending he wasn't interested, he made a beeline over to them.

"Mom, what are you doing?"

"I thought it was high time I got dinner ready. Watching Yuzuki and Raja cook just got me all excited!"

"Tempura and curry...so is this what I think it is?"

"Exactly! The Oosuki special!"

While they spoke in family code, the potatoes finished frying. Tempura potatoes.

Masato grabbed one from the cooling rack and popped it in his mouth.

The moment he bit in, two kinds of heat spread through his mouth—the hot potato and the bite of the curry spices.

"Mixing curry powder into the tempura batter. Yep, this our family's—ow, hot!"

"Oh dear. Did you burn your tongue? Should Mommy blow on it?"

"Nah, I'm fine. Now this is the good stuff." *Chomp.*

"Hey, don't go stealing bites!" *Chomp.*

"That looks good. I'll just have one." *Chomp.*

"Can I have some, too?"

“Of course! Go ahead, Porta dear. But be careful! They’re hot.”

“Okay! Thanks!” *Chomp.*

“Allow me.” *Chomp.*

At some point, Gary Hunn had joined them and was gobbling up hot tempura potatoes.

They were gone in the blink of an eye.

“Oh my! You ate them all! Hee-hee-hee. Takes you back, doesn’t it, Ma-kun?”

“Oh, yeah. I remember that.”

“Ha-ha! An amusing anecdote? Do share.”

“Nah, Gary, you wouldn’t be interested—”

“This all happened when we still lived in the real world. Ma-kun had started spending more and more time in his room, and I almost never got to see or talk to him.”

“Mom! Don’t overshare!”

“Oh? And then?”

“But when I made this dish, he’d always come down and start eating them off the cooling rack! Before I knew it, everything I’d fried was gone!”

“She’d be all, ‘They’re not done!’ and I say, ‘Sorry,’ but then eat the next batch she cooked.”

“Exactly! But it meant I could see you and talk to you, and see how healthy your appetite was. This is an important dish for the two of us.”

“It’s not *that* big a deal, but...they’re definitely one of my favorites. That’s all there is to it, Mr. Hunn.”

“I see...hmm. One question—what do you mean, they’re not done?”

“The real dish isn’t just curry-flavored tempura potatoes. Let me just finish one off for you.”

Sugar, soy sauce, water, blended to taste—liquid seasoning.

Boil that seasoning in a saucepan, add just the right number of tempura

potatoes, and drop in a lightly beaten egg, swirling it all together.

When the eggs are firmed up enough, scoop the eggs and potatoes onto a bowl of freshly cooked rice.

Sprinkle a little seaweed on top, and voilà.

“All done! The Oosuki Family Curry Potato Tempura Rice Bowl!”

Hot and gooey. Both the dish and the accompanying story warmed the heart.

“Let me at it.”

Gary Hunn sat down before the rice bowl, looking utterly serious. The sampling began.

With a dramatic chopstick flourish, he took a bite. Chewing rice and potato together.

“...Ho...”

A quiet breath escaped him...and his consumption speed skyrocketed. “Ho-ho-ho-ho!” The bowl was off the table, tipped up as if it were liquid, then inhaled down his hatch!

Then Gary Hunn set the empty bowl back down.

A hush settled over the street. Everyone gulped.

“Er...h-how was it?”

“Hmm. Undoubtedly excellent.”

“W-well...that’s nice! But...it’s just a little home cooking. I doubt it’s what the Legendary Gourmet was—”

“This is the dish I’ve been seekiiiiiiiiiiiiing!”

“...Huh?”

The iron table shot skyward and exploded in the air above. A massive firework-like burst that lit the evening sky!

Tears gushed from Gary Hunn’s eyes.

“As a traveling gourmet, I have eaten all the delicacies of the world! But there was just one dish—one!—that I yearned for and could not find.”

“And that is?”

“The dish my mother used to make. She has long since passed, ending all chance of encountering it again—so I at least sought a dish that resonated with those same family bonds! A dish made by a mother for her child!”

He picked up the tear-filled bowl and dumped it out on the ground. Then he held it out to Mamako.

“Mamako! Can I have another?”

“You certainly can. As many as you like!”

“M-Mom...if you make him too many, we won’t get dinner!”

“Don’t worry. I have plenty of ingredients. And stories about time with you, Ma-kun? I’ve got extra helpings, giant portions, stuffed to the absolute brim! Hee-hee!”

“Yeah, let’s leave those more at the hidden-seasoning level...”

“Um, if you’re making more, can we order some?”

“Same here! For three!”

The villagers and adventurers started lining up. Soon, Mamako was surrounded by customers.

“Oh my! We’re going to be so busy! Right, Ma-kun?”

“Okay, okay, fine. I’ll help! But only if you promise not to tell too many anecdotes.”

“I can help, too! I’ll do my best!”

“Then so will—”

“Medhi. In the interest of food safety, you’re on waitress duty with me.”

“Yuzuki! Raja!” Mamako called. “Let’s combine our mother and child powers and make a lovely family dinner together! Yaaay!”

And like that, a pop-up family restaurant opened for business.

Everyone wanted to try the dish that had made the Legendary Gourmet weep.

The serving side was kept busy. Heaps of food. “And then Ma-kun—” “Stopppppp!” Served up with no shortage of embarrassing anecdotes that left one boy on the brink of death.

Mamako smiled over at Yuzuki and Raja, who were watching from a distance.

Eventually, a realization dawned on them.

“...I think Mamako’s trying to tell us something.”

“Our cooking, our memories... You know, when I was little, you almost never let me help you cook.”

“You used to grab my legs and say, ‘Let me help!’ But...the food was for the shop, so I couldn’t just—”

“You did let me help with meals we ate at home, but it was basically always curry.”

“I don’t serve that in the shop, but sometimes I just get a craving... Oh. So that’s why you’re so obsessed. Ha-ha.”

“Yeah! That’s why I make curry.”

They looked at each other and laughed.

“...It’s been so long.”

“How ’bout we make something together?”

Raja held out a hand, and Yuzuki took it.

A few days later, the town’s restaurant row was abuzz.

One shop in particular was attracting the lion’s share of attention.

“This way for a family meal made by a real-life mother and daughter!”

“Enjoy Japanese food from the real world! Come on in!”

There was a large elephant statue by the door to Yuzuki’s shop.

Raja wore her belly dancer outfit and Yuzuki her kimono. Both of them were calling to the crowds.

“Mom! Don’t put it like that! Mention the curry, too!”

“Yes, yes, we also have curry. We’re competing to see which of our dishes get the most orders! Interested? Come take a look!”

“The curry croquettes and curry *udon* are a point for each of us!”

“Enjoy our family’s home cooking!”

They’d staked their pride on that competition and it was still ongoing—but now it was a friendly contest.

Masato’s party were relieved to see it.

“Running a single shop together resolves the separation issue.”

“That’s all the meddling we need to do. The rest is up to them.”

“Yes! They’ve gotten so close— Whoa?!” *Gurgle.*

“Don’t worry, Porta. I didn’t hear a thing. This case is solved—so let’s eat. Since we’re here, let’s try their shop!”

Masato took a step forward.

But Wise and Medhi both grabbed a shoulder.

“We already made your meal.”

“It’s our greatest dish yet. Dig in!”

Masato was forcibly dragged across the street to the empty lot where Raja’s shop had been.

The air was filled with a powerful spice. There was Mysterious Object X, its many legs a-wriggling.

“What the—it’s matured! It’s even more horrifying than before!”

“*Get into my bellyyyy!*” *Grrrr.*

“Wait, I’m the one being eaten?!”

Eat or be eaten—no, even if Masato won the fight, he would not eat this thing.

Who knows what Darwin would make of *this* survival of the fittest?

Adventure Report Vol. 1

Author: Mamako Oosuki

.....

Just between us, but when you deep-fry things, the smell of the oil alone is enough to give even the cook heartburn. But Ma-kun and the girls gobbled everything up, so it was all worth it. I'm so glad I sweated over that fryer! What a lovely meal.

.....



Surveyor: Masumi Shirase

The children's smiles are meals in themselves—perfect for a diet.



Chapter 2 Does MOD Stand for Mom's Overbearing Devotion?

Catharn was bathed in warm afternoon sunshine.

The town moms had gone out shopping, prepping for an early dinner, and had inevitably run into one another in the crowd and got to talking.

"And my boy went, 'You bought even *more* useless crap?!' I mean, really."

"Mine's the same. I'm just buying a little reward for myself! I don't see why he has to complain. So rude! It really gets on my last nerve."

"That's the problem with children. They don't know how to be grateful. And—oh?"

Just as their chat was really heating up...

A beam of light appeared at the city entrance.

The magic circle had activated, and the Hero's party arrived.

"Oh my! It's Mamako!"

"It's been *too* long! How have you been?"

"Oh, hello everyone! So nice to see you."

Everything else was instantly forgotten, and the moms thronged around Mamako.

Completely ignoring the rest of the party.

"Mamako's popularity remains unchallenged."

"Her fame far surpasses that of the nominal Hero. Right, Masato?"

"I know, shut up."

Wiping his tears, the Hero turned his back on the Sage, Wise, and the Cleric, Medhi.

But the Traveling Merchant, Porta, had been watching Mamako. "The moms sure get along!" she said. "Does she know them?"

“Mm, I wonder. They kinda look familiar, but...who really pays attention to their mom’s friends?”

Getting involved would be exhausting. He generally kept his distance.

“So how are things? Adventures going well?”

“Do tell us about them, Mamako! Oh, why are just standing here? Let’s find somewhere to sit a spell.”

“How about over there? There’s a new café just two blocks over.”

“Oh, we must check that out! Shall we?”

Mamako wandered off, led away by the pack of moms.

“Masato! This could be bad!” said Wise. “When they say ‘a spell,’ it means at least an hour!”

“Stop! Mom! Back it up! We’ve got things to do, remember?”

“Oh my! That’s right. We’re here to check on the Mom Shop!”

“You are? Well then, we’ll have to have tea some other time.”

The mothers all smiled at Masato’s desperation.

That mild threat averted...

“Whew... That made me sweat more than any battle...”

“Sorry about that. Let’s get going.”

The party headed down the road once more.

“Mama, can I ask you something? Do you know those ladies?”

“Yes, I met them several times while I was shopping. We’d chat about this and that, and before I knew it, we were all friends.”

“Quick chats are the cornerstone of the mom community,” said Medhi.

“Yes! We talk about housework and the like... Oh, I know! Ma-kun, why don’t you join us next time? You might learn a lot!”

“Pass.”

Firm, clear, and blunt.

Mamako's smile froze. Her hands covered her face, and she crouched down right where she stood.

"We're adventuring together, so I thought we'd grown closer...but now he's back to his old ways, cutting me down with a single word..." she wailed.

"Ugh, Masato made Mamako cry! You suck, Masato."

"How could you do that to your own mother? I thought better of you..."

"Masato... *Sniff*..."

"Oh, come on! Even Porta's giving me sad eyes? I wasn't being *that* mean!"

The girls' stares said otherwise.

"I'm not trying to cut you down, Mom! I just...don't care about housework! I doubt I'd contribute much."

"Don't worry, Ma-kun. Mommy isn't trying to push you into housework; she just wants you to learn more about moms. That's all! ...So?"

Mamako stared up at him. Mom eyes, damp with tears. Not letting him get away.

His entire body was covered in goose bumps.

"Don't do that! My heart skipped a beat! In a bad way! ...Argh, fine! If the opportunity arises, I'll do this trial mom chat thing."

"An opportunity, huh? I'll hold you to that," said Wise.

"Let's get started, then," said Medhi. "Porta, if you would?"

"Hrm...what materials do I need to create an opportunity...?"

"You guys don't need to *make* one! And Item Creation can't do that anyway. We're going to the Mom Shop, right? That's the goal here, remember?"

Masato ran off before this conversation could get any worse.

The Mom Shop was a support center for families that had lost their way. Mamako was the owner, and it stood on the corner of the shopping district.

The front door was a fancy affair, and a bell rang when they stepped through—the interior looked more like a café than a consulting agency.

There were several tables and a counter with stools. The idea being that it was easier for people to share their problems while enjoying tea and treats.

Daily management of the shop was handled by a girl named Mone—and today she was with the mysterious nun, Shiraaase.

“Sup, Mone... Oh, hey there, Shiraaase. Mm?”

Masato immediately noticed something was wrong.

Mone worked here...but she was seated at the counter. And Shiraaase was a guest...but was behind the counter, making tea.

Their positions were reversed.

“Oh, Masato! You’re here! I missed you so muuuch!”

“Huh?”

One of them had run in for a spoiling—but the wrong one.

Shiraaase, mother of a five-year-old, unflappable even in the face of death—now had her arms around Masato and was rubbing her cheek against him.

Her rather sizable chest pressed up against him, which was nice, but...this was Shiraaase. The blood drained from his face.

“Maaasaaatooo!”

“Eeeek?! Wh-wh-wh-what’s going oooooooooon?!”

“What else? I’m just restocking my supply of spoiling! If I run out, I’ll turn into a black hole, remember? Hence the cuddles!”

“That’s Mone’s thing, not yours! That doesn’t apply to you, Shiraaase!”

Masato tried to escape the embrace, but she was glued to his side.

“What the—it’s like you really do have Mone’s gravitational pull...uh, help? Anyone in my party wanna lend a hand here?”

“Hmm...is this, like...a new way to tease Masato?” Wise wondered.

“With Ms. Shiraaase, anything is possible,” said Medhi. “This certainly looks like another one of her schemes... Porta, we shouldn’t get in the way.”

“Okay!”

“Wise! Medhi! You both need to stop piggybacking on her crap and help me! ...Argh, fine! Mom!”

He abandoned all pride and turned to Mamako.

“Hee-hee! Mone is such a sweetheart.”

Mamako was just watching over them with a smile.

Then she turned to Mone, who was calmly sipping a cup of tea at the counter.

“Hello, Ms. Shiraaase. You’re being extra odd today.”

“Hmph, I thought the disguise was perfect, but you saw right through it, Mamako.”

“Just a hunch!”

“Most impressive. Well, now that I’ve thoroughly enjoyed seeing Masato’s reaction to me being needy—we should probably end the functionality test.”

Mone’s voice, but Mone never sounded that calm. She was acting like Shiraaase.

Then she pulled out something that looked like a mirror, tapped the screen—and light surrounded her. With that, Mone...became Shiraaase.

“A MOD?”

“Yes. We’ve itemized an official MOD. It’s still in testing, though.”

Masato felt Shiraaase deserved a good smack for all this but resisted the urge. He took a seat at the table, Mone stuck to his side like always.

The group enjoyed some tea and treats as they focused their attention on the device in Shiraaase’s hand.

“Um...so what’s a MOD?” Mamako asked.

“It’s short for Mom’s Overbearing Devotion. Heh-heh-heh.”

“Lay off the corny jokes and give her the real explanation!”

This woman was a menace. Maybe he really should smack her.

Porta’s hand shot up.

“I don’t get it, either! What is a MOD?”

“Not like I’m an expert, but they’re things that change up games, right?” said Wise.

“Yeah, it’s short for ‘modify,’” added Mone.

“In this case, they use existing graphics and systems to make alterations,” said Medhi.

“Hmm, I think I understand... No, wait. How is that different from cheats or hacking?” Mamako asked.

Shiraaase folded her arms in thought. Masato and Medhi, who also had some gaming knowledge of their own, followed suit.

“That’s a tough one...”

“They do change a lot, so some people think that MODs *are* hacks...”

“On the other hand, MODs just bring new ways of enjoying a game, without messing with what made it fun in the first place.”

“Most people would put them in the gray zone,” Shiraaase said. “It depends on how they’re used, really. But again, this is an official MOD, so using it will cause no harm.”

“Well, if an admin says so, it must be fine,” said Mamako.

“It’s tricky, but I think I get it!”

Mamako picked up the MOD mirror, and she and Porta looked it over.

Watching this out of the corner of his eye, Masato asked, “So? Why a disguise MOD?”

“Users have been asking for one for a while now. This is a game after all; people want to change what they look like.”

“Oh, I get that!”

“You wanted to be bigger?” Medhi said, pointedly staring at Wise’s chest.

“Let’s take this out back.” “Your backside is big enough already.” “Kay, time to die.” They were soon grappling, but no matter.

“I’ll spare you the details, but it’s basically a transformation spell, only without a time limit. But it’s a full-body transformation and can’t just be applied to specific body parts.”

“Poor Wise. Oh, how I weep for her.”

“I wasn’t getting my hopes up!” Tears of blood streamed down her face.

“Additionally, you can’t alter yourself at will. You must register your new form in advance. Masato, why don’t you try it out?”

“Sure, I’ll give it a shot.”

Masato took the MOD mirror from Mamako and reflected himself in it.

A magic circle automatically appeared, measuring him from head to toe—registering his current appearance.

“Okay...so the next step is the transformation, but there’s not much use in me transforming into myself.”

“Then let’s have Mone transform instead,” said Shiraaase. “Heh-heh-heh...”

“Yes! Let me!”

Mone grabbed the MOD mirror from Masato. Once her reflection lined up with the image of Masato in the mirror, she tapped the surface.

Mone’s body was surrounded by light, leaving her looking just like Masato!

And naturally, she was still plastered up against him.

“I look just like you, Masato! Amazing, right?” *Rubrub.*

“Eaughhhhhhhhhhhhh?! Why am I cuddling with myself?!” *Shudder.*

Seeing his own face rubbing against his chest sent his fight-or-flight instinct into overdrive.

Meanwhile, the girls were getting ideas.

“...This might be our chance.”

“I agree.”

Medhi took the mirror. “Mamako, if you please?” “Hmm? What is it?” With that, Mamako’s image was registered.

And promptly used by Wise *and* Medhi. “Allow me to join in,” *and* Shiraaase. “Oh, can I?!” *and* Porta, too.

The results...

“Stop rubbiiiiing! Come on, people, help me out—huh?”

Unable to deal with Monesato himself, Masato turned to his party for help...

“““““Oh my. Is something wrong?”“““““

...and found a row of five Mamakos smiling back at him.

His information-processing abilities were instantly overloaded. “...Pssst...”
“Oh dear! Ma-kun?!” A meltdown in his brain.

When Masato regained consciousness, he glared balefully at the MOD mirror and announced, “You’ve got to ban this thing.”

“Aww. But it was so much fun! Let’s play with it a little more. ‘Mkay?” *Rubrub*.

“No more playing! All done! Stop goofing off and get back to work.”

Mone was back in her original body, but no amount of cuddling could mollify Masato’s position on this topic.

“Work...?” Mone said. “Oh, right! I was in the middle of something!”

Mone leaped to her feet and ducked behind the counter, returning with a bundle of flyers.

The front of them read *Now Hosting Mom Symposiums!* in Mone’s handwriting.

“...What’s this for?”

“Tomorrow the Mom Shop is running a symposium!”

“Events targeted at mothers. Management is planning on contributing. I’m actually here to discuss that point—but you haven’t started advertising yet?”

“I had so much other work to do that I wound up putting it off... O-oh no...”

Mone stared down at the flyers in horror.

“Then we’ve just gotta get those sent out pronto.”

“Exactly. Divide up the labor for maximum efficiency.”

“Yes! I’m happy to help!”

Wise, Medhi, and Porta all got to their feet.

Generous offers of assistance brought tears to Mone’s eyes.

“Aw, you guys...thank you! Porta’s cool, but I’ve never really liked Wise and Medhi...still, I’m glad you two are around to help!”

“You probably should’ve kept that to yourself. Geez.”

“The delivery route... Oh, Mone, you have a map ready. Porta, can you duplicate this? We’ll need three more.”

“Okay! Leave that to me!”

Porta pulled out several sheets of paper and used Item Creation to make town maps. Then she marked the distribution locations on each.

With the original, they now had four maps, for four people.

There was another generous assistant, so they were one map short.

“Uh, Porta, one more for—”

“Nope! You don’t need a map, Masato. You’re the symposium host.”

“...Wha?”

“We need staff for the event itself,” said Medhi. “This is a great opportunity to learn more about mothers, Masato. The perfect role for you.”

“So you need to rest up! You’ll need the energy tomorrow!” agreed Porta.

“Er, but wait...”

“Oh, that sounds lovely! Mommy will join in with you, Ma-kun! Tomorrow will be such fun! Hee-hee-hee.”

“No, no, no, no! Time out! I’d much rather help distribute flyers! Don’t make me do this...!”

“That settles it! Masato will be working tomorrow, and if Mamako went out to deliver flyers, she’d just get to chatting. The four of us will make quick work of it! Off we go!”

Mone and the girls each grabbed a bundle and were out the door.

“Ugh...I should’ve never said anything.”

Masato collapsed on a table. RIP.

Then he saw the MOD mirror in front of him.

“Would you like to try that out while you wait for the girls to get back?” asked Shiraaase.

“...Nah, not after I banned them from using it.”

“While your brain was short-circuiting, the girls all added themselves. You could become any one of them and cop all the feels you please.”

“No way! I’d never do that!” Masato yelled, snapping upright.

Wise and Medhi were both glued to the cracks in the door, staring at him with deep suspicion. “I would never!” They seemed unconvinced but went away again.

“Geez. Like I’d use this thing! ...I mean, I guess I am kinda curious how it feels, but...”

Obviously, he’d keep his hands to himself.

Just to kill time, he flicked through his companion’s images in the mirror.

Masato was the only male registered. So any choice he made would involve a gender swap.

“Hee-hee. Which one are you thinking about, Ma-kun?”

“Yeah, I’m thinking nobody...eep!”

Mamako had leaned in so abruptly, it startled him, and the mirror slipped from his hand.

It hit the floor, and the mirror broke—and both Masato and Mamako were bathed in light!

“You’re kidding, right?! ...Wait, what just happened?!”

Masato looked down at himself.

Large breasts encased in a white dress. He could feel the weight of them.

When he moved, they swayed.

“Uh...am I...? Oh no...”

“Oh my! Ma-kun, you’ve turned into Mommy!”

That voice sounded *nothing* like Mamako. He turned—and saw his own face.

“Mom’s turned into me, and I’ve turned into Mom? Oh, God. Make it stop! Put us back!”

“The MOD should have worked on only one person at a time. And now that it’s broken...there’s no other way to turn you back.”

Shiraaase made this sound like a triviality.

“Um...”

“I’ll have to take it back to management and get it repaired. They’ll probably be done by tomor—no, I think it’ll take at least a year.”

“It’s not a joke! Get this repaired ASAP!”

“We’ll do what we can. If you’ll excuse me...”

Shiraaase gathered up the pieces of the mirror and departed the Mom Shop. Leaving Masato and Mamako.

Masato was Mamako. And Mamako was Masato.

“Uh, Mom...?”

“Hee-hee! Now *you’re* Mommy, Ma-kun!”

“You do realize what this means, right?”

Mamasato did not seem to comprehend the gravity of the situation. Masako, meanwhile, was white as a sheet. For a long while, they stared at each other in silence.

That evening, long after the sun had set...

The flyers were distributed, and the Mom Shop closed for the day. Mone had gone home.

“Mamako, what’s for dinner?” Wise asked.

“Er, uh...s-something very good! You’ll love it! Hee-hee!”

“Huh? You usually have an answer ready... Is it a secret? Hmm...”

Wise had poked her head into the kitchen and was left frowning.

“Masato’s helping her in the kitchen? That’s unprecedented,” said Medhi.

“I wanna cook with Mom today, yo.”

“What’s going on...? Is this...a bad omen? I—I feel faint...”

The spectacle proved too much for Medhi. She looked ready to swoon.

“Mama! Let me help, too!”

“Th-thank you, Porta...dear. But don’t worry! Today Ma—sato’s helping.”

“This is gonna be a family affair, man.”

“Got it! I won’t get in your way! Have fun!”

Porta’s eyes gleamed. So happy to see mother and son standing shoulder to shoulder in the kitchen.

Conscious of the party’s looks of confusion and support, their prep work continued—Mamako and Masato, still in each other’s bodies.

“...So far, so good?”

“I think so, Ma-kun—I mean, man.”

“I don’t actually say ‘man’ that often. Whatever. We just gotta get through this somehow.”

He’d keep his head high pretending to be doing things while Mamasato swiftly did the real work.

“Lightly sauté the meat and fillings, wrap in parboiled cabbage... We’re having quick cabbage rolls, man.”

“Gosh, I’m only just now learning what that dish is called...”

“Yo, Ma-Mom, don’t you think this is the perfect opportunity to try cooking, man?”

“Goodness gracious, I’d really rather not... I’m just focused on getting through

this with my dignity intact... *Sigh...*"

Having called for an outright ban, accidentally activating the MOD and getting stuck in Mamako's body was a nightmare.

If they find out...

Wise and Medhi would tease him until he had no nerves left to fray.

Even if they didn't find out, the situation itself was flat-out mortifying.

Being anyone else would be one thing, but being his own mother?

No one could ever know.

This is a trial. A quest that I, the Hero, must overcome!

Pretending as much helped anyway.

He made the call to try and keep this secret until the mirror was fixed.

"Tomorrow at the latest! There is an end in sight! Let's do this thing...tee-hee!"

"Oh my, dude. Ma-Mom is so riled up!"

"It's the desperation talking."

"Then let's finish off this meal, yo! They've just gotta simmer!"

They had to stay pressed close against each other so the girls behind couldn't see, which left them hobbling around the kitchen like it was a three-legged race. But they got the pot filled and the rolls in the soup.

Behind them...

"...Medhi, Porta, group huddle. Thoughts?"

"Yes...something definitely feels off, but—"

"Mama and Masato are having so much fun! I think it's a good thing!"

"I see...hmm."

The whispering was entirely audible, but Masato ignored it with all his might.

Dinner was soon finished.

"Once they're cooked through, we move them to the rack."

“I—Mommy can handle that, girls! See?”

Splat. “Maybe a little gentler.” “M-my, but of course!” He managed to get it looking right again, and the cabbage roll was done.

Rice and a side salad were on the table, with the girls across from the mixed-up Oosukis.

“Okay, everyone, hands together, man!”

“Er, is that your line, Masato?”

“Mamako usually says that, but—”

“H-heavens to Betsy, yes! That’s what Mommy says! Everyone, let’s dig in!”

The start of a delightful meal...he hoped.

But an unpleasant silence settled over the room. Except for Porta, who was happily eating.

Wise and Medhi were eating, too, but wordlessly glaring at Masako and Mamasato.

“Er, um...is something amiss?”

“No?”

“Don’t mind us.”

The stares failed to subside.

“Mamako, question.”

“Wh-whatever is it, Wise?”

“These cabbage rolls are really good. What’s the secret ingredient?”

“Huh?”

Masako had been watching the whole thing.

But he had no way of knowing if any of those ingredients would qualify as secret.

“Er, um...oh, I know! The secret ingredient is love! Hee-hee!”

“Huh. Right.”

Wise sounded extremely annoyed. Terrifying.

“Mamako, can I ask you a favor?”

“O-oh my! What could it be, Medhi, dear?”

“I’d like another helping, but could you grab a cabbage roll out of the pot bare-handed like you always do?”

“Wha?”

“That’s what you always do, Mamako. It’s no trouble for you, right?”

“Oh, and more for me, too,” said Wise. “Grab two at once, like a two-hit attack. You can do it!”

“Y-yes, I s-sure can! After all, I’m Mamako! Okay, two extra servings coming right up!”

Masako got up and moved over to the simmering pot.

It was clearly very hot, but not *fatally*. He was already tearing up.

“Come now, you two. That isn’t funny, man.”

“I don’t think Mama’s ever done that!”

“Aw, you got us.”

“Heh-heh. What gave it away?”

“Er...that was a joke? Oh, of course it was. Golly! Such a ruckus!”

What a relief.

But their staring had intensified.

“Urp...”

Wise and Medhi were giving Masako the visual third degree.

Uh-oh...are they already onto us?

Masako braced himself.

But they suddenly smiled.

“You guys didn’t quite seem like yourselves, but I guess we were imagining things.”

“We just aren’t used to seeing you both cooking—we overthought it. It’s so nice that you did that together.”

“Yes! I love it when Mama and Masato get along!”

They were now offering up their blessings.

So...they haven’t found out? Are we safe?

He hoped so. He decided to roll with it. He let himself relax.

And the moment he did, Mamasato whispered, “Looks like we’re safe, man!”

“Yeah. If we survive dinner, the rest is easy. Just gotta go to bed. Let’s make it an early night.”

“Then once we’re done with laundry, I’ll get the bath ready!”

“Yeah, good... Wait, what? Bath?”

Bath.

“Hey, since you two are so close all of a sudden, why don’t you get in together?” suggested Wise.

“Er...b-but that’s...”

“What’s this? Mamako, you’d usually be thrilled to bathe with Masato,” said Medhi.

Their stares were back on. Searching. Like he was in a lineup of suspects.

“R-right you are! Ma-kun, let’s take a bath together!” Masako blurted out, just trying to get himself off the hook.

“...Actually, bathing together was probably the best choice.”

The dress had to come off somehow.

And the underwear along with it. You couldn’t take a bath otherwise.

“N-n-nope, can’t do it. Can’t touch these. Mom, please!”

“Sure thing.”

Masako held both hands up in defeat, and let Mamasato handle the disrobing.

His lower body was free of all constriction.

Then the tightness at his chest vanished, and the weight dropped, feeling even heavier.

“Had no idea they were this heavy...”

“Oh? What is, yo?”

“N-nothing! Forget I said that. Never mind!”

“Hee-hee-hee. You’re so odd, Ma-Mom. Yo, now it’s my turn...”

Mamasato reached for her clothes. “I’ll take those off! Don’t look! Close your eyes!” Masako quickly undressed the body he should have been in.

And they stepped into the bathroom together.

This was immediately a huge problem.

“Make sure you wash yourself clean, man!”

“R-right! I can do that! It’ll be fine! Washing your mom’s body...”

“We used to wash each other when you were little!”

“Yeah! Let’s pretend it’s just like that.”

He took a seat on a stool and lathered up a sponge with body soap.

Hands, arms, neck, back, legs.

All the easy bits done. Which meant...

“Great, all finished! Just gotta rinse...”

“Now, now, you need to get every inch, man!”

“Argh...”

There was no escaping the mom check.

Fine. He just had to quickly sponge the danger zones...

He froze for a minute, sponge poised, then gave up in tears.

“...I can’t. Help me.”

“Hee-hee. Fine, dude.”

Mamasato took the sponge...

And it touched the tip of Masako's boobs.

"Nghaaaaah?!"

"Oh my! Did that hurt, man?"

"N-nope! I'm fine! I didn't feel a thing! You're just washing me!"

Masako was in a state of panic!

"Om̐ a vi ra hūṃ khaṃ! Om̐ a vi ra hūṃ khaṃ!"

"That's a prayer to Mahavairocana! For safe childbirth."

"Uh...that's not what I thought it was."



Mahavairocana was pretty up there as far as Buddhas went, and in charge of a wide range of virtues.

Beside the point.

If I just get through this, I'm home free!

With that belief in mind, Masako held it together...

The next morning...

"Ma-Mom, it's morning. Get up, dude."

"...Hngg...I'm still sleepy..."

"Well, fine. Then I'll have to give you a wake-up kiss, man!"

"Nope, don't like that visual! Stop! I'm up!"

Morning kisses were bad to begin with, but coming from his own face? Absolutely not.

Masako pulled himself out of bed and looked around, still pretty dazed.

It was only just starting to get light outside. The room itself was still dark. Porta was fast asleep on the next bed.

"It's too early..."

"I always wake up this early, man. I've got laundry and breakfast prep to do!"

"But that's your... Oh, I'm you right now."

"I could take care of it, but if someone sees me at it, they'd find out! Dude!"

"Right... Yeah, I'd better handle it."

He quickly got himself ready, and they snuck out of the room.

First, laundry.

"So how do you usually do this?"

"Well...like this, yo."

The inn's laundry room had a pot large enough for an adult to fit in.

She put the clothes in it. "Water?" "I just use leftover bathwater, man." Back

and forth between the bath and the laundry room, with a bucket.

“This is a ton of work... My arms are already worn out.”

“Next, the detergent, then this.”

Mamasato reached for the magic circle inscribed on the laundry pot.

The water began to churn.

“Huh... Maybe all the pots in those RPG homes are actually laundry machines...”

“No time to stand around watching, man! We have to finish morning prep while it’s running.”

“R-right...”

Not even time to catch your breath.

No rice cookers here. She had to wash that rice by hand, put rice and water in a clay pot, and put it on a burner made from a fire gem.

Next, they had to chop up pickles and the ingredients for today’s miso soup. Following Mamasato’s instructions, Masako carefully sliced them all. *Tonk, tonk, tonk.*

“Weirdly hard to make them all the same size...”

“The laundry pot should be almost done! Let’s get that on the line, man.”

“Er...but we’re still cooking?”

“Gotta multitask, yo! Both laundry and cooking, quick as you like!”

“Sheesh...”

They adjusted the fire on the burner and dashed back to the laundry room.

The pot had just finished draining, and the laundry was all stuck to the sides at the bottom.

“Oof, they’re soaked and really heavy... We’ve gotta carry all this outside?”

“The key is to stretch it all out so it doesn’t wrinkle.”

They went out back and started hanging everything up. One piece at a time.

“These are Wise’s—” “She wears different-colored panties every day, man!” Making extra sure to get the wrinkles out.

“Yo, I’m worried about the rice. Let’s run and check on it.”

“Run?!”

They ran back into the kitchen to make sure the rice was okay.

They also lit the burner under the miso soup then dashed back outside to finish hanging up the laundry.

“Hoo boy...this is too much work on an empty stomach... I can’t even catch my breath...”

“Our morning battle is just beginning, man!”

They were still in the prologue.

The sun was up—and it was finally *actually* morning.

The girls were gathered around the table, still looking very sleepy. Time for breakfast.

“Yawn...looks good. Mamako, more miso soup!”

“Geez, you’re really chugging that! Uh—I mean, certainly, dear!”

“Today’s pickles are fantastic, as usual. Can I have a few more?”

“Er...oh, why, yes! There’s some in the kitchen! I’ll just go get them.”

“Could I get another bowl of rice?”

“C-certainly! I’ll make it a big one!”

Serving everyone while trying to finish his own meal...

Despite the frantic rush, Masako somehow ate his breakfast.

“Whew...now can I get a break?”

“First, we’ve got to do the dishes, man!”

“I shoulda known.”

Masako tearily carried the dishes to the sink and started washing, Mamasato supervising his every move.

Seemingly oblivious to how much work this was, Wise called out, “Oh, Mamako! Got a sec?”

“What the—I mean, yes? What is it?”

“We’re gonna head out.”

“We accepted a quest yesterday. It’s just a little errand, quite simple, nothing to worry about.”

“I’m gonna join them! Is that okay?”

“A quest...?”

There was something worryingly sneaky about their smiles. If only he could be part of that...

But that would mean running all over town as Mamako, and he was tired enough already.

Only one option. Act like Mamako and send them off like she would.

“That does sound nice!” *Beam.*

“Your smile’s kinda stiffer than usual, but cool! Let’s get ready to go!”

“Do take care! Ma-sato and I will rest here at the inn. We need a rest. Without rest we might die.”

“Um, what are you talking about? The two of you gotta get ready for the symposium.”

“...Oh...”

Masako gasped in horror, but Mamasato was nodding.

That was *today*.

Once the girls were gone, Masako and Mamasato set out.

“I wonder what this symposium will be like, man!”

“I don’t see any way we’ll be able to enjoy ourselves. This will be nothing but exhausting—it’s basically suicide.”

Masako was dragging his feet like a zombie as they neared the Mom Shop.

There were so many moms gathered, they couldn't even reach the shop. The whole road was packed.

And they were so worked up, chattering away, that it was impossible to hear anything else.

It was pandemonium. Pandemomium.

"Oh my God...this is pure hell..."

"Oh! Masato! Mamako! You're late!" Mone called out. She was running around handing out drinks and treats.

As one, the crowd of moms turned toward Masako. "Oh my!" "The star is here!" The crowd advanced on him.

"Eeek! M-M-Mo—"

"Ma-Mom, have fun, yo! I'll just go help Mone out."

"Urp! You're kidding?!"

Mamasato was already gone.

Masako was all alone, surrounded by moms.

"Mamako, good morning! Today's going to be so much fun."

"Uh, yes, let's hope so..."

"Your son came to help you? How lovely."

"Yes. I'm so proud of him!" *Grin.*

"You don't mind if we have a nice long chat today, do you, Mamako?"

"Uh...be gentle?"

Doing his best pleasant smile, he searched for an escape route.

There was none. He was completely surrounded.

I just gotta somehow keep them from realizing I'm not Mom!

Caution was the key to survival.

"Can I get right down to questions? My son just won't talk to me anymore. It's like he's avoiding me!"

“Best to just leave him be. It’s important to give him space.” Firm.

“My! That really doesn’t sound like you, Mamako. You usually teach us tricks to get our kids to let us dote on them! Are you really Mamako?”

“Urp...I was thinking from the son’s perspective...”

The moms were starting to stare.

Was this the limit of his Mamako act?

“Oh, I’m just kidding! You’re clearly Mamako! Oh-ho-ho!”

“Y-yeah! Hee-hee-hee! ...Whew.”

Masako was safe for now but already tired. He started to droop.

“Oh, Mamako, are you okay? You’re so listless!”

“Y-yeah, there was so much housework this morning. It wore me right out...”

“What do you mean? There’s always housework!”

“I did laundry, made breakfast, aired out the futons, and cleaned the house!”

“We’ve got a dog, so I had to take it for a walk. Twice around the town!”

“I took care of all my work deliveries this morning. Hustled so I could make it to this symposium!”

“Seriously...? And they’re *this* fired up? That’s some crazy stamina...,” Masako muttered to himself.

They were clearly a different species from a teenage boy. Nothing else made sense.

Masako was in a cold sweat, barely focusing.

“Oh! Isn’t that Mamako? Come, have a word with us!”

“There’s more of them?!”

More moms were pouring in. Three of them were weaving their way through the crowd.

One had that reformed delinquent vibe. The second was elegant and dressed to the nines. And the third was a bit spacey but sweet, with a bag slung over her

shoulder.



“Oh? Have we met?” one of Masako’s companions asked the trio.

“Nah, we don’t get out much, so this is a first!”

“No wonder I didn’t recognize you! ...Well, since you’ve made it here, you really should chat with Mamako. Make way, ladies!”

“Thank you so much.”

The other mothers stepped aside, letting the new arrivals surround Masako.

“H-hi, nice to meet you...” he said.

“Yeah, hi, moving right along, tell us everything that’s cool about your son,” said the first mom.

“He’s very handsome! He’d never admit it himself, but I’m his mother, so I can say that with pride!”

“How old was he when you stopped bathing together?” asked the second mom.

“Five...but for certain reasons, also last night...”

“Wo—I mean, how lovely! I want my family to be as close as yours!” chirped the third. “How can I do that?”

“Raise your child’s endurance levels. That’s the key to everything.”

The more this was based on personal experience, the more confident he was.

But then a bell rang out—the clattery kind they used when drawing raffle numbers.

“Your attention, please! All this commotion has drawn in something extra special!”

“Dude, they’re gonna do one of those sales demonstrations moms love so much! Don’t miss out, man!”

Mone and Mamasato were pointing down the street. Several wagons were approaching.

“Ooh, sounds neat.”

“This is what mothers do for fun. We’ll have to join in.”

“Masa—I mean, Mamako! Come mom with us!”

“No, I... Aughhh...”

He was not given a chance to refuse. The mom trio grabbed Masako and dragged him toward the sales demonstration line.

“Yo, Ma-Mom! Let’s enjoy this together!”

“You’re way too wound up about this...”

Mamasato secured a position right next to him.

And a man in a flashy suit came out to start the demonstration.

“Hello, lovely ladies! Are you ready? We’ve got a very special product for you today! Can I get a holler?”

“““““Whooo!””””” *Clap, clap, clap!*

Like the crowd, the three new moms were all clapping and shrieking.

There was one male voice mixed in, but thinking about that would just make Masako sad, so he ignored it.

“What’s so exciting about this? I don’t get it at all...”

“Don’t be silly! This is that shopping network thing! Easy-peasy.”

“Any mom would get excited. Unless...wait...”

“Oh, right! I’m also a mom! Eeek!” *Clap, clap!*

Couldn’t get caught. Summoning the last of his energy reserves, Masako desperately tried to act like an excited mom.

The salesman put a frying pan on a fire gem burner and started frying up a fish.

“Observe! This frying pan can cook fish at this heat—but look! It doesn’t stick! It’s still clean! Whoo!”

“““““Whoo!”””””

“We’re in an RPG... Use that tech to make a shield or something...”

“Um, what? Is that what a mom would say?”

The ex-delinquent mother shot him a glare. Can't get caught!

"Wh-whoo! Lovely! Nonstick pans are the best!"

"Thank you for your support!" said the salesman. "Well, since you're so excited, Mamako Oosuki, why don't you come up here and demonstrate?"

"...Huh?"

"Good luck, Mamako."

"Whoa—I mean, nice! I'll cheer for you!"

"Ma-Mom! Go for it, dude!"

The elegant mom and shoulder bag mom—and Mamasato, too—all pushed him forward.

Masako would have to give a demonstration.

"Go right ahead, Mamako!"

"Argh, fine! ...Oh my! This fish really *doesn't* stick! Golly! I want one!"

""""""So do I!""""""

Masako's words lit a fire under the crowd, and they started lining up to buy. He was a hopeless cook, and if even he could keep the fish from burning, the product was clearly legit.

"Let's keep it going! Our next product is the exercise ball! You can tone yourself just rolling around on top of it! Isn't that nice?"

""""""Too nice!""""""

"Mamako, if you'd be so kind?"

"I'm still demoing?!"

Masako wound up planking on top of the balance ball. "Amazing!" "You could have a figure like hers!" Mamako had been in shape to begin with. This sales technique was clearly a con.

"Th-that's all, right...?"

"Well, Mamako, if you'd introduce our next product?"

“Am I even getting paid for this?!”

He went from one introduction to another: “Natural pearl necklace!” “Look at the size of those pearls!” “Luxury brand bag!” “Perfect for a sudden errand!” “A collagen drink!” “For smooth skin!”

The moms mobbed the stage, buying everything.

I can't...I'm dying...literally...

Masako's HP had long since hit zero.

But even decked out in a pearl necklace and brand bag, with a nonstick pan and collagen drink in each hand, perched on a balance ball...

“And now for our next product! Mamako?”

“I can't—I can't—I can't...”

“Oh, come now! Wait till you see this!”

The salesman took out a very familiar mirror. He tapped the screen...

And was covered in light. Replaced by—a notoriously unflappable mysterious nun.

Shiraaase.

“This MOD mirror is limited to only one mom here! What do you say?”

“...Name your price.”

Once again, he wanted to give her the biggest smack of her life, but he definitely didn't have that much energy left.

Evening.

The symposium had concluded, and the party was back at the Mom Shop for cleanup.

“...That was the hardest day ever...”

Masato was back in his own body, flat out on the table, long past moving.

Mamako was restored as well and placing a cup of hot cocoa next to him.

“Great job, Ma-kun! Takes a lot out of you, doesn't it?”

“Yeah...but at least we didn’t get caught.”

They smiled at each other, relieved...

“Well? We wanna let him think that?”

“The whole body swap thing? I noticed, too! Are you just gonna keep that to yourselves? How long were they like that?”

“Ever since the four of us went out delivering flyers, Mone.”

“They seemed way closer than usual, so I kept quiet!”

The girls were sipping tea at another table, talking among themselves.

“How did they... Oh, Shiraaase.”

“I did not infoorm anyone! They’re your friends; of course they saw through it. Also your performance was dreadful.”

Masato bolted upright and glared at her, but she didn’t bat an eye. Irritating.

All that work he’d done to hide it, but everyone had known from the get-go.

He could have spared himself so much trouble...

Rocking between shame and fury...

“Pretending we didn’t notice was definitely the right move. Masato got the full mom experience!”

“The opportunity certainly arose.”

“He kept his word! Good job, Masato!”

“Argh...”

If the opportunity arises..., per his own words. He couldn’t argue that.

“Anyway, best we just keep it secret. For everyone’s sake,” said Wise.

“Actually, I was keeping a secret of my own! Specifically, that Shiraaase came over first thing in the morning and the MOD mirror was already working,” said Mone.

“Hah?!”

“We used Wise’s transformation spell to change our appearance then joined

in the symposium,” Medhi explained. “But that’s just between us.”

“Those three new moms?!”

“We should probably keep what we all talked about a secret, too!” chirped Porta.

“If you tell us everything that happened, Masato, then I’ll explain things to you. What do you say?” asked Shiraaase.

They all glanced his way.

If they did that...the endurance thing, the handsome son brag, and the bath with Mom were all definitely fatalities in the waiting.

“...What’s a few secrets among party members?” he said before collapsing on the table again.

Mamako settled down next to him, smiling.

He scowled up at her, unsure what she was so happy about. Then a thought struck him.

“...Living as you for a day,” he began, “I realized something.”

“Oh? What’s that?”

“You really do a lot. Thanks.”

“Hee-hee. You’re welcome.”

Masato’s voice had a note of genuine respect.

Adventure Report Vol. 2

Author: Masato Oosuki

.....

Afterward, I snuck over
to an armor shop alone
and tried on a steel apron.

Mom's boobs were way heavier. Carrying
all that weight and still having the energy
to run around and wield a sword
is downright unreal...

.....



Surveyor: Masumi Shirase

I'm more interested in how you feel
wearing pantyhose. Rewrite this.



Chapter 3 Adventurers' Respite

A fortress lurked deep in an oppressively overgrown forest.

Once, to fend off the monster threat, humans had stacked stone upon stone, creating a structure not easily bested. There was nothing more unyielding—no matter how fierce the combat, it staved off all invasions.

The fortress's unvarnished record had earned it the reputation *unfella*—it was the pride of every guard inside.

But that was a long time ago.

Time passed, its role diminished, and it was abandoned. Left to their own devices, the plants grew wild, and monsters moved in.

"A hundred years old. No gas or water. No longer fit for human dwelling, but the perfect real estate for any monster... Oh! I think we can get in here."

The vegetation's unchecked growth had created gaps in the exterior walls big enough to slip inside if they turned sideways.

Masato's party followed.

"Doesn't mean they can just move in."

"The area villagers were very worried! We should do something!"

Wise the Sage and Porta the Traveling Merchant easily slipped through after him.

Up next was Medhi the Cleric.

"Sorry, I can't get through there."

"Um, why not? We managed it easily."

"Wise, I do hate to point this out, but there is a significant difference between the two of us. That is, in terms of measurements."

Medhi had turned sideways and tried to slip through, but her chest was a bit too well-developed to make that feasible.

However... “Right, c’mon!” “Huh?!” This just annoyed Wise, and she grabbed Medhi’s arm, yanking. Her boobs were squished, flattened, and scraped against.

“Wise! Don’t do this! If you scrape my boobs off and I end up like you, what then?!”

“So? Not a problem for me! Wait...they do look smaller! Wow, congrats.”

“Whoa...M-Masato! I didn’t know you could shave boobs off! Did you?”

“Sorry, Porta, not my department. I have no opinions here.”

Nothing good ever came of jumping into a girl fight. Masato elected to keep his distance.

He was more worried about the last party member.

“If Medhi barely fit, then...Mom definitely can’t.”

“Yes, it doesn’t look promising, but I’ll try my best! Just you wait.”

“Er, no, don’t force—”

But before he could finish, Mamako’s smiling face was already inside the gap.

His mother seemed hell-bent on getting through. She was holding her generous bosom in place with both hands, trying to force her way in.

She took a single crab-step sideways and got stuck.

“Oh dear. I can’t move another inch!”

“That’s why I said don’t! Ugh, fine. I’ll do something! With my Hero power!”

Masato seized the Holy Sword, Firmamento! And with the power of physics, he attempted to leverage the gap!

It did not budge.

“Argh, no use! Okay. Mom, you’ll have to use the power of the earth again.”

“Yes, I’ll do just... Oh?”

But just then, Mamako’s massive mom mammaries...

Like springs squeezed too tight, they went *boing*, and there was a rumble, and the gap opened.

“Oh my! Now I can get through! Hee-hee.”

“You have got to be kidding.”

“Moving a rock wall with her boobs alone...only Mamako.”

“Then again, that’s all in day’s work for her.”

“Mama is amazing! Even her boobs are all-powerful!”

“Back up a minute... This doesn’t actually make sense. There has to be some limits! We’ve gotta draw the line somewhere!”

“Well, Ma-kun, let’s get this quest started! Yay!”

“““Yay!”””

“Is nobody listening?!”

But they’d reached their destination—the starting point of today’s quest.

Said quest involved exterminating the monsters in the fortress.

Now that mom boobs had proven more powerful than the Hero’s might, Masato was forced to focus on the task at hand.

He stood at the fore of his party, and they began exploring.

“Supposedly there are a *lot* of monsters in here, but I’m not seeing any.”

“Perhaps that’s what they want us to think. Could be an ambush.”

“If they’re smart enough to do that, it could be trouble.”

“I’ll keep close watch! I won’t let any monster movements go unnoticed! Hngg!”

They picked their way through the darkness by the light of Porta’s lantern.

Plants had invaded the inside of the fort, too, but seemingly without causing significant structural damage. The walls and ceilings were all intact.

There were footprints in the soil—proof that monsters roamed. They led ahead, and off to the left...

“Something’s here!” Masato exclaimed. Something had moved in the corner of his eye, and he quickly raised his sword.

“Don’t worry! There are no monsters that way.”

“Huh? There aren’t? Well, if you say so, Porta... But I swear I saw something move.”

“I think this is what you saw, Ma-kun.”

Mamako was pointing at his bangs.

“Er...my own hair? Uh...I guess that’s possible. It’s getting pretty long... I guess it has been floating in and out of my vision.”

“Geez, Masato, give us a break. You are so annoying.”

“Panicking over your own bangs. If they’re going to get in the way of this quest, why don’t we just cut them off now?”

“Then let Mommy get her scissors! Hee-hee.”

But Mamako was waving her swords around instead. “Don’t!” The tools and location were all wrong for a haircut.

“Sorry for the false alarm! I’ll be more careful! Let’s go.”

He pushed his hair back. His vision clear, they moved on.

But something was obviously wrong.

“...This place is deserted.”

They wandered aimlessly through the fortress, finding nothing amiss.

They peered through one door after another, discovering plenty of piles of dry leaves that looked like animals had slept there—but nothing else.

No matter how long they searched, there were no monsters.

“So, uh...what does this mean?” asked Wise.

“There are two possibilities. They’re hiding...or they’ve already been exterminated,” said Medhi.

“Some other adventurers got here first? No, that can’t be it,” said Masato. “We took this quest first thing this morning from the nearest Adventurers Guild.”

“And the receptionist lady clearly said, ‘I can infooorm you that this is a new

request that just came in.’ She looked super familiar, so I remember it well.”

“Yeah, I know. Far too familiar.”

Masato closed his eyes, picturing her unflappable visage.

“She clearly wanted us to take the quest—basically forced it on us. So hard to imagine anyone else getting here first.”

“In which case, the monsters must be hiding!”

“Yeah, that seems the likeliest theory. I guess just...keep your guard up?”

When monsters were hiding, that usually meant they’d all jump on you when you stepped in the wrong room. Your standard-issue ambush.

As if in answer to their call, they spied a courtyard up ahead. A fairly large one.

“The second we step out, some iron bars are gonna come crashing down behind us.”

“We’ll be trapped, and a bunch of monsters will start roaring and stuff.”

“Then they’ll attack from all sides. We’ll be in serious trouble...”

“And Mama will say ‘Hyah!’ and it’ll all be over!”

““Exactly.””

“Hold up, Porta. Just this once, I’m gonna—”

“No time like the present! Mommy will do her best!”

“No, wait, Mom! Let me—”

They entered the courtyard.

Iron bars slammed down over the door behind them!

That was it. Nothing else happened.

“...Huh?”

They’d each drawn their weapons, Porta safely behind them, ready for anything.

But a full minute—five full minutes—passed without incident.

Not a single monster appeared.

“.....Uh, what’s going on?”

What did this mean?

They needed answers.

When the party got back to the guild looking for those answers...

“I must offer you my humblest of apologies,” the lady at the counter said with exceptional politeness.

But since her expression remained as immobile as ever, it didn’t really feel like she meant it. This was Shiraaase, disguised as a guild receptionist.

“There’s clearly something going on here. Spare us the apologies, and fess up! We demand accurate infooormation. Joke free.”

“Robbing me of my modest pleasures in life. You’re a heartless Hero, Masato.”

“Maybe find a less obnoxious pleasure. C’mon, explain.”

“Very well. Allow me to infooorm,” Shiraaase said reluctantly. “Accepting an extermination quest, but finding no monsters to exterminate...is perfectly normal.”

“How so?”

“Because today, every monster in the game has the day off.”

“.....Huh?”

Monsters. With a day off.

Masato had no clue what that even meant. He glanced back at his party, and there were question marks over every head.

“Er, what?”

“Perhaps this is new territory for you, but you may have heard the government is pursuing labor reforms?”

“They are? First I’ve heard of it...” said Wise.

“I’ve read about this. Closely monitoring work environments and hours,

ensuring adequate vacation hours, increasing work satisfaction and productivity. Was that the gist of it?”

“Oh! I get that! There are rules requiring time off!”

“Huh...? Medhi is one thing, but even Porta’s heard about this? ...M-Masato, have you?!”

“Obviously, I know everything.” *Shing!* ☆

The light gleamed off the white of his teeth.

That just proved he was lying, though. Wise looked pleased to have company in ignorance. Masato, not so much.

“Medhi and Porta are exactly right,” said Shiraaase. “Thus, the monsters also have the day off.”

“Okay...so monster labor reform. No, wait. That makes no sense. They’re monsters! It’s not a job!”

“But they’re being monsters twenty-four hours a day, three hundred and sixty-five days a year. If they don’t take a few days off, even monsters will get tired!”

“Mom, that doesn’t even make sense. By that logic, we’d get tired of being humans all the time...”

He trailed off.

Was he really never tired of being human?

Oh...I guess I am sometimes.

His eyes glazed over in a thousand-yard stare. Porta looked puzzled, but Wise and Medhi’s gazes were similarly empty. Being a teenager took its toll.

If humans got tired, it stood to reason monsters did, too.

“Since Mamako was kind enough to offer up a plausible explanation, we’ll go with that and keep the real one a secret,” said Shiraaase.

“What’s the real one?”

“For example, the fact that people like myself—admins supervising the game

world—are required to monitor any dangerous activities. Like combat. That’s our job.”

“Aha.”

“Which means that even if it’s my day off in the real world, I’m required to be here.”

“Y-you are...?”

“Even if I have a five-year-old daughter, I’m forced to pack her a lunch and beg my parents to take her to the zoo while I work.”

“Er, that...sounds awful...”

“Meanwhile, hotheaded teenage boys oblivious to my work-life balance insist on adventuring, and I’m forced to take over for employees on their day off, providing new quests to entertain them. Isn’t labor great? Rah-rah labor.”

“...Who...would be so horrible? These boys suck.”

Masato did not meet Shiraaase’s eyes.

Giving monsters a day off limited the adventurers’ actions, allowing the admins some much-needed time off of their own. That was clearly the real goal here.

“Back to the point. As I’ve said, today is the monsters’ day off, so no extermination quests can be completed. I do apologize for not infoorming you in advance.”

“Nah, that’s fine...”

“Neglecting to mention that fact was a simple human error caused by overwork. Can I ask your forgiveness?”

“Y-yes! I forgive you! I’m a man of my word! Don’t worry about it.”

“How kind of you, Masato. You have my thanks.”

The guilt had him bowing his head, and Shiraaase smiled then rose to her feet.

“I would like to call this an end to my work hours and return to my day off.”

“Go ahead! Please, enjoy yourself! W-we’ll take today off, too! Don’t you worry about a thing!”

“Really? That is a relief. Enjoy your respite.”

Shiraaase dropped a CLOSED sign on the desk and headed out, muttering, “... Over a week since I got a weekday off...my daughter’s at kindergarten...hmm, how best to spend this time? Heh-heh-heh...”

She vanished into the back room.

Masato watched her go, and Wise clapped a comforting hand on his shoulder.

“She toyed with you again, huh? Buck up.”

“Argh. Everything after ‘For example’ was just hypothetical, huh? I shoulda known.”

“But I suppose the outcome isn’t bad? Getting you to agree to a day off is an accomplishment.”

“Yeah, agreed,” said Wise. “R and R is important.”

“Yes! I think days off are good things! Right, Masato?”

He wasn’t sure why Porta was quite so passionate about this subject.

But he wasn’t taking it back. And if all the monsters were on vacation, they couldn’t very well quest or even grind in the fields. So there was only one option left.

“Right, then...I guess...”

“Let’s all have a good day off! Yay!”

“Can we get a respite from you jumping on my lines, Mom? *Sigh...*”

Masato hung his head, robbed of his chance to lead the party once more.

A beautiful, sunny day.

Mamako had doled out a bonus to his allowance, so his wallet was full.

He was ready for a day off.

“But what should I do? It’s a bit early for lunch...”

They'd split up at the guild, electing to spend the day on their own terms.

Be back at the inn for dinner, but no other restrictions. Genuine free time.

Everyone else had already headed out, leaving Masato alone in front of the guild.

"...What do you even *do* with time off?"

Masato generally spent weekends gaming to his heart's content, but he was already *in* a game, so he had no idea of what to do with himself.

He looked up at the sky above, and his hair got in his eyes again.

"Maybe I should get a haircut...mm, sure. Sounds like a plan."

He reached up and toyed with his bangs, then headed out.

This was an inn town. Much smaller than towns with actual names, but still big enough to be worthy of the name.

They'd never been here before, which meant he didn't know where anything was—so Masato elected to enjoy the search for his destination.

"This place has style, at least."

He didn't see earthen walls like this in the real world. Or hear his footsteps on cobblestones or the clatter of passing wagons.

All of this was unique to a fantasy world, and he took a moment to savor it.

He glanced around, his eyes following some bored-looking Warrior and Mage girls.

"No, not just looking at the girls. Enjoying the sights! Yup."

Making excuses to no one in particular, he quickened his pace.

The crowds were increasing. He followed the flow and the sounds of bustle, figuring that would take him to the shopping district...

But then.

"Wait, really? That sounds so cool!"

A familiar voice.

“Is that...Wise?”

He peered through the crowd and saw a girl in red making a racket. Definitely Wise.

She was talking to a handsome, stylish male model type. Masato couldn't hear enough to tell what they were saying, though.

“Is he hitting on her? ...Nah, no way. Impossible. Nobody would hit on Wise.”

He was sure they wouldn't.

But then Wise put her arm through the male model's, and they walked off together.

“Er, wha—seriously?!”

Seriously. They were clearly chatting happily.

Masato was left gaping.

“...Well, fine. None of my business. She can do what she likes! Yep.”

He decided not to care. Busy not caring. No caring here.

Wise was a party member, and they got on well. But that was no cause to be jealous just because she was talking to some other dude. He had no reason to be.

If someone hit on her, and she went off with them and did whatever—that was her choice.

He didn't care *at all*. Which was why...

Masato was hiding in the shadows, peering around the corner.

“...Not that I actually *care*. That's not why I'm tailing them. It's just that I'm the party leader, and it's my job to ensure the safety of every member.”

Passersby were giving him funny looks, but he was past noticing. He had to keep his party safe. Definitely the reason.

He was watching Wise and the male model, who were still walking and chatting.

Just as he was wondering where they were going, they turned into a shop.

Masato slipped out of the shadows, merging with the crowd, and walked past the storefront.

“A clothing store...?”

The window was filled with brightly colored tops, short bottoms, reasonably priced accessories—typical girls’ fashion.

“Picks up her and moves straight to buying her presents? Damn, dude.”

He kept his eyes sidelong all the way past and then did a U-turn.

As he passed a second time, he looked farther in. Lots of pink. Hearts everywhere. Whole place was bright and vibrant. Only girls inside. Probably pretty raucous.

“Oh, there’s that model guy. Don’t see Wise, though...”

He’d run out of shops to walk past and had to do another U-turn.

On his third trip he moved as slowly as possible, trying to locate Wise. The chocolate cornet-esque pigtails framing her head oughta make her stand out more than this, but...

“...Hmm?”

Masato realized every girl in the shop had turned to glare at him. Like *he* was the weirdo here.

“Uh...n-nope, I’m just passing by! Ha-ha-ha!”

This was not good. He mustered his least suspicious smile and moved away.

“There’s a creep outside! Get him!”

“Anyone with combat skills, lend a hand! Quick!”

“Aughh! Wait, I didn’t even—”

“Nobody’s faster than a Thief! You’re not going anywhere!”

Some of those girls had been vacationing adventurers.

One of them shot out of the shop too fast for the eye to follow and quickly nabbed Masato’s arm.

Oh, she’s...got a lot up top...

Maybe not the right time for *that* thought.

A moment later, a really muscly girl had him in a nelson hold, and he was dragged into the shop.

“Wait, wait, I’m not a creep! Wow, those are really pressing against my back...”

“Ugh, see? Total sleazebag.”

“No—crap! I didn’t say that! Not thinking anything weird!”

“We oughta kill him now! But it’s our day off...no weapons with us...anyone here know magic? It’s an emergency!”

“Okay! I got this!”

“Huh?”

The changing room curtains were flung open.

Wise came out in her Wednesday underwear, magic tome in hand.

“No creep is any match for the Ultimate Sage’s magic! Just you wait—er, Masato?”

“H-hi.”

Wise cocked her head, giving him a long look.

Clearly confused.

“What are you doing?”

“Uh, well. Best to be honest, I guess? I saw this guy hitting on you, and then you both headed into this store, so I was checking up on you. That’s all!”

“Huh? Hit on? Me?”

“Yeah! That handsome dude was chatting you up!”

“Handsome? I guess that’s not...*wrong*...”

Wise glanced that way. The male model looked very surprised.

Seen up close, the male model’s chest was certainly...rounded...

“Wait...you mean...that’s a girl?!”

“Yeah. And she works here! If I’ve got a day off, I figured I’d look for some new clothes and was wondering where to go. Then I bumped into her, and she showed me the way.”

“...Is that all?”

“That’s all.”

Wise puffed out her chest, nodding emphatically.

“So then this whole thing is just...”

“You being a big dumbass and creating a fuss about nothing.”

“That’s what I thought. Ugh...”

“You’re *such* an idiot... Anyway, girls, he’s not a creep, just stupid. Sorry my party’s token moron had to bug you all.”

“Hmm, no prob. We get the picture.”

“Our mistake. Sorry!”

The girls holding Masato let go.

Glad that was cleared up, he let out a relieved sigh...

“So your boyfriend just got all jealous and followed you, huh?”

“That’s pretty obnoxious, but...hope you two are happy together!”

“Yo, wait, what...? Ah!”

The girls left, giggling. He wanted to cry.

“Masato, you pretended to be my boyfriend and followed me? Ew, that’s so gross!”

“I did no such thing! I’ve never claimed to be your boyfriend!”

Wise was cackling and making fun of him, but she looked a little bit red-faced... Maybe that was just his imagination?

“Anyway, glad that’s over with. Let’s talk rewards,” said Wise.

“Rewards? For what?”

“For me clearing up that mess and saving you! I think that earns me at least

one accessory. On your dime.”

“Oh...yeah, fair. Just...keep it reasonable, okay?”

“Score! Lemme take a look. Come on, I wanna know what you think.”

He still had to pay for a haircut, so this was a big ask, but it was important to demonstrate gratitude.

Then again.

“Hmm, but...”

“What? You got a problem?”

“Buying a gift to thank someone is all well and good. But with you...”

“What, am I not good enough? I *will* punch you.”

“No, not that.”

“So?”

“I dunno about buying presents for someone who’s cool just walking around the store in her underwear.”

Wise had come flying out of the changing room in her bra and panties, and she had yet to put on any clothes.

“Huh? ...AughhhhHHHHHH!”

“You only just noticed? Are you, like, actually dumb?”

“Sh-shut uuuuuuuup! This is...uh...y-your fault!”

“How?”

“If you’d seen me like this and reacted *at all*, I’d have figured it out by now! Why didn’t you say anything?!”

“Well, it’s our day off. I figured you were relaxing with a little light exhibitionism.”

“Go to hell!”

He was joking, of course. He’d just been too busy being physically restrained to deal with that.

“That makes this *all* your fault, Masato! I’m gonna kick your ass!”

“Lashing out to hide your shame?”

“That’s it! ...*Spara la magia per mirare... Morte!*”

“Girls can be so unreasonable...”

The reaper bearing down on him looked vaguely apologetic.

Then again, if this helped her calm down, Masato was happy to soak up an instant death spell.

The coffin containing Masato was enveloped in the light of life.

“...*Spara la magia per mirare... Rianimato!*”

“Mm? I’m alive again?”

He opened his eyes...and was no longer in the clothing store.

Tall ceilings, stained glass, crosses... A church, apparently.

Medhi was smiling gently down at him.

“How are you feeling, Masato?”

“Not bad at all...but a little lost.”

“Unfortunately, our shlub of a Sage cast a spell on you, and you perished. Then the culprit, the most pathetic of Sages, dragged you to the church, and I revived you.”

“Why a church? She can cast Rianimato herself.”

“The reason escapes me, but either way, you’re back now. So...”

Medhi held out a hand.

“The fee for a church resurrection will be two thousand mum.”

“Aha. So that’s your angle!”

He turned his eyes to the pew and found the shlub Sage sitting sullenly.

“Wise...”

“Wh-what? You got a problem with me? I mean, sure, I think I probably went a bit too far, but...still, you shouldn’t have—”

“You remembered to put your clothes on! Good for you. Such a big girl!”

“Ugh, you suck! Fine. Not apologizing.”

Not only did she not apologize, but she slipped around behind him and ground her fist into his back. What a dame. It did not hurt at all.

“Masato, you’ve been revived. That incurs a fee, and you must pay up.”

“Nope. Not blowing my cash on your spite. You’re just joking, too. Right, Medhi?”

“No, I’m demanding appropriate compensation. I’m helping out at the church, volunteering my time. I revived you as part of my volunteer duties, so you’re required to pay the resurrection fee.”

“...Seriously?”

“Yes. It goes right here.”

Medhi held up the official church collections box.

When he still looked reluctant, Medhi’s smile grew steadily more sinister. “Okay! I’ll pay!” He forked it up.

Half his money gone.

“A haircut with the rest...seems unlikely. Damn you, Wise. I’ll get you back for this one day. Making me waste money...”

“I can’t hear you!”

“Geez. Still, Medhi, helping out at a church on your day off? That’s awfully nice of you.”

“I was shocked, too. I dragged your coffin in here, and there she was! Volunteering. Weirdo.”

“I don’t see what’s so surprising. Altruistic acts on your days off elevate your humanity—a most beneficial means of passing time.”

Medhi glowed like an angel.

She was bathed in heavenly light. “Ugh, blinding!” Wise, ever materialistic (between her shopping trip and retributive actions), was almost exorcised. As

she should be.

Medhi gleefully watched as Wise writhed in agony then suggested, “Since you’re both here, perhaps you could join in?”

“Er, us...? Hmm...”

“If it went on our transcripts, it could be worth it, but...this is a game...”

“One must not approach volunteer work with an eye to compensation. But perhaps the game gods will offer up some reward?”

“The game gods? There aren’t—”

“Then let’s say admins instead.”

“Meaning...?”

“Ms. Shiraaase has gone home for the day, so our actions are likely being monitored by someone else. Someone we can trust.”

““Someone *not* Shiraaase...””

Masato and Wise both leaped on that point. Their heads went up.

If another admin was watching now...

And saw the players doing good deeds? And was considering a reward?

“...They might just...secretly boost our stats?”

“Or lower the odds of magic getting sealed?”

There was a chance.

At least you had to hope there was.

“Heh...I suddenly feel like volunteering my butt off!”

“Volunteering is the only thing on my mind! Let’s do it!”

“What should we have you do...? Oh, cleaning would be good. Would you two mind cleaning?”

““Okay! Volunteer cleaning it is!””

“I’ll hold on to your coats and valuables for you. Not to worry.”

““Thanks!””

Masato and Wise rolled up their sleeves, grabbed rags, and got to polishing! Crosses, altars, pews, and floors!

Cleaning all the fiddly metal bits was extra fun!

“Look, Wise! I’ve got this doorknob gleaming! I really feel like I cleaned it!”

“Targeting anything shiny! Even a crappy polishing job does the trick! Good idea!”

They threw themselves into it.

Meanwhile...

“I have to remain on standby in case anyone needs antidotes or resurrections. My job is to sit right here so I can respond at a moment’s notice. I am absolutely not just doing nothing. Heh-heh-heh.”

Medhi was seated languidly on a special priest’s chair, reading a book.

Nearly an hour later...

“Hah...hah...that was...a lot of volunteering...”

“Hahh...hahh...I did it...I cleaned everything...”

They’d cleaned themselves out and collapsed in the pews.

But their work had paid off. The entire church was gleaming. Filled with light.

“Good work, you two. I’m sure the game gods are delighted. That’s enough for today, so you can leave now.”

“We will! I’m tired, broke, and ready to head back to the inn and rest.”

“Same here... Medhi, you’re hanging around?” Wise asked.

“My shift is almost over, but I have to hand it to the next... Oh...”

A door in back opened. Someone was coming their way.

“S-so, you two head out! Quickly!”

“O-okay...?”

“Then, I guess we will...?”

Medhi was hastily pushing them away, so they left the church.

The doors slammed shut behind them. They heard Medhi racing back up the aisle.

Masato and Wise exchanged glances.

“...You thinking what I’m thinking?”

“Yeah. Something’s up.”

This needed verifying. They opened the door a crack, peering in.

Medhi was talking to an actual nun.

“Medhi, thank you so much. You coming was such a big help.”

“I’m pleased to be of assistance.”

“When the priest suddenly took the day off, we were at a total loss. I can’t use antidote or resurrection spells, so we had to find a replacement Healer somewhere...”

“It’s a good thing I saw the request posted at the Adventurers Guild. I feel certain I was guided here.”

“You not only filled in for the priest, you also cleaned everything beautifully! You are a wonderful person. Like an angel!”

“I had the time, and it was no big deal. I’m glad you were pleased. Hee-hee.”

“Then I’d better take care of this reward. And of course, there’s a bonus for cleaning!”

“Oh, you shouldn’t have...but I can’t very well refuse, can I?”

A leather purse filled with coins exchanged hands.

Medhi took it with her best smile...

“Volunteer work, huh?”

“No eye to compensation?”

“...Erk.”

Masato and Wise each had a hand clapped on one of Medhi’s shoulders.

The entire reward went in the donation box, and they left the church behind.

“Calling your paid job volunteering. Wow, Medhi.”

“Taking credit for all that cleaning we did, huh? Wowww, Medhi.”

“D-don’t look at me like that! I always meant to donate it! And I was going to hand the cleaning bonus over to you later.”

“Working on your day off for extra cash. Wow, Medhi.”

“As greedy as you are evil. Wowww, Medhi.”

“Wise! That’s just mean! Argh. I’m sorry, okay? Let me off the hook!”

Not letting this chance go to waste, they kept teasing her as they headed toward the inn.

It was just past noon, and they were all getting hungry...

“Oh, there’s some food stalls!”

“Mm, those kebabs smell pretty good.”

“So they do! Let’s all eat together! I’ll pay! Look, they have drinks, too.”

“Make sure you order the most food for the most money.”

Free lunch! “Enjoy!” ““Thanks!”” Nothing better than a meal someone else was paying for.

“Now if I can just get Wise to waste some money, too, I’ll be satisfied.”

“Hey, don’t! I’m sorry I got mad and killed you, okay?”

“Oh, sorry. I seem to have actually paid for this out of Wise’s wallet.”

“Huh?! Why did you have my... Oh! You held our stuff while we cleaned! You never gave them back!”

“It just slipped my mind. So sorry about that... But don’t worry.”

“What?”

“I split the bill evenly between the two of us.”

“Proving this was premeditated! You’re so evil!”

Wise got the punishment she deserved, and Masato couldn’t be happier.

They walked on, squawking about this and that.

And reached their inn.

“I wonder what Mom and Porta are up to?”

“Mamako...is probably shopping. Bet Porta went with her. Poking around for items and materials,” said Wise.

“Yes,” agreed Medhi, “they’d both take an active approach to days off... Oh?”

When they reached their rooms, the doors were open.

Anyone here...?

“Wow! They’re all so cute! What do you think? Be honest!”

“Uh, yeah. They’re a good fit for us.”

“I like that one! A tail would look good on me.”

“Then best we don’t. I recommend the long-eared one that looks like me.”

“Ohh, I just can’t decide!”

It sounded like a conversation...

But it was all in Porta’s voice.

The trio peered around the doorjamb.

“Okay, Piita! You’ll have to decide!”

“I think you should do whatever you feel is best, Porta.”

“But I like them all best! Augh!”

Porta had all her stuffed animals laid out on the bed, including the one she usually kept on her shoulder bag. She was lying on the bed with them, flipping through a catalog.

Everyone grinned.

“Aha! So that’s Porta’s day off. Adorable,” said Masato.

“Picking things from a catalog, rolling around in bed—not a bad way to relax.”

“A moment of bliss, indeed. What could be better?”

“Mm. Adorable. I feel better just watching her.”

Soft cheeks pressed against soft plushies, rolling around on the bed with a blissful smile...

He could watch Porta do this for hours and hours.

“Hngg...I’ve been saving up my allowance...maybe I should start with this big bunny with the nice smile, like Mama... Mm?”

She finally noticed them.

“Sup, Porta.”

“Oh...huh? ...Eep...?!”

“We know how you feel. Go on! One, two...”

“Aieee?!”

Porta let out the scream of her life, frantically grabbing all her animals and hiding them under the covers.

The bear, the cat, the fox—and then Porta herself, beet red, peeking out from her blanket. Too cute.

“M-Mahyahyo?! Whise?! Mary?!”

“Porta, I don’t have a little lamb. That name is all wrong for me.”

“Sorry to just burst in on you, Porta,” said Wise. “We weren’t trying to spy on you or anything, but the door was open...and, like, it was kinda hard to interrupt.”

“N-no, um, er...”

“I’ll be honest: We saw the whole thing. And heard it. It was all mega cute. Thanks for that.”

“Aughhhhhhhhhhhh... Ssss...”

There was a hiss as steam escaped her ears, and Porta was down. “Ack, I’m sorry! Real sorry!” If Masato had been in her shoes, he’d definitely have died. It was inevitable.

Clinging to consciousness, Porta looked up, teary-eyed.

“Sniff...I’m shorry I was acting weird...”

“Nothing weird about it! You were just enjoying your day off to the fullest! Right, Wise? Medhi?”

“Totally. Nothing better than kicking back in bed on a day off. Sooo...I’m gonna join in! Lemme have that cat!”

“I’ll join you, as well. Was it this fox that you had talking like me?”

“Aha! It smiles, but you can see the darkness lurking within! So Medhi. Oh, I’ve got an idea! ...*Spara la magia per mirare... Transformare!*”

Wise cast a transformation spell, and both she and Medhi went *poof!*

And were now super fluffy. Costume Cat Wise and Costume Fox Medhi!

“How’s this? Pretty cool, right?”

“Life-size stuffed animals? I approve, Wise.”

“Whoa! Wise, Medhi, you’re both so cute!”

“Thank you, thank you. But we oughta put you in one, too! Mwa-ha-ha-ha!”

Cackling like the devil’s own minion, Wise cast the spell again.

Porta was now dressed like her favorite doll, Piita. Piita-Porta!

“Whoa! I’ve turned into Piita!”

“Then let’s get started! One, two...”

“Hah!”

Cat Wise and Fox Medhi dove into bed, hiding under the blankets with Piita-Porta. Everyone snuggling together, smiles galore.

Close-knit party members, rolling around in bed.

Surrounded by things they loved, doing whatever they pleased, enjoying every second.

This was right. This was the perfect respite.

“Okay, then Bear Masato’s join—”

“Huh? What’s wrong with you? Are you totally stupid?”

“This is a girls-only costume party. No boys allowed. Go away.”

“Fine...”

Rebuffed! He'd figured. The world did not allow you to dive into bed with girls and squeal.

“Right. Then I'll just go and sulk, and waste the rest of my day off doing nothing, alone.”

“Don't worry, Masato! You won't be alone!” said Porta.

“Huh? I won't?”

“There's someone right there who's just *dying* to spend the day with you,” added Wise.

“You should enjoy your day off together,” said Medhi.

“Right here...?”

Masato turned around.

“Mommy was just thinking how lonely she was!”

Costume Bunny Mamako was standing in the doorway, looking at them.

Tears gushed from Masato's eyes.



“Argh...there’s nothing sadder than seeing your own mom in a plush animal costume... This is too much...”

“Come now, Ma-kun. Cheer up! Mommy will spend time with you. What should we do, hop hop?”

“Get that costume off now! We’ll talk then. But even with you back to normal, I dunno what there is to do...mm?”

His bangs had drifted into his eyeline again.

“...So what’ve you been up to, Mom?”

“Well, it was a nice day, so I did upkeep on all the clothes we don’t normally wear. Don’t you ever just want to give them some sun and let the wind blow through them?”

“Nope. Can’t relate.”

“Hee-hee. But that’s how it is.”

They were in the inn’s backyard. Masato on a chair, eyes on the inn’s porch.

On the clothesline was everything they normally kept stashed in Porta’s bag.

Sailor uniforms, school swimsuits...mostly Mamako’s costume collection.

Masato quickly looked away, fixing his gaze on the barber cape tied around his neck. Loose enough to let him breathe, tight enough so no hair could get in.

“It’s just...that doesn’t sound much different from what you always do.”

“I suppose it isn’t. But you know, I’m happiest just being a mom. So I thought it was a good day off.”

“I guess that’s how it is, too?”

“Mommy thinks so. And I’m ever so pleased you let me go snippy snip with your hair, Ma-kun! You haven’t let me do that since you were in grade school.”

“I do wish you’d stop using that baby talk term, but...that is *you*.”

“Yes, welcome to Mommy’s barber shop. Come on in.”

Mamako moved around in front of him to get a good look at his hair.

This involved leaning in, which meant the valley between her mommeries was suddenly in extreme close-up, almost engulfing his face.

“Hey?! Don’t...!”

“Oh? What?”

“N-never mind...”

She wasn’t deliberately doing this. So he just closed his eyes, pretending it didn’t matter. Letting it matter would be a failure.

He focused on negatives, calming himself.

Can’t believe I’m getting a mom cut at this age... If Wise and Medhi saw this, it’d be the death of me.

He needed a haircut. But no longer had the money for it.

And his mom had experience with these things. And she had the time.

Well, fine. Desperate times call for desperate measures.

He’d piled up any number of excuses...but was gradually finding he didn’t need them.

It was sunny and warm, and his haircut was coming along.

The grass swayed in the breeze. Birds sang. Scissors snipped. All peaceful sounds.

Too peaceful.

“...What a nice day.”

“Yes. A nice, happy day.”

Her hand gently stroked his hair.

Over and over. Like he was a good boy.

It felt far too good. It wasn’t fair.

“...I guess days like this aren’t bad, either.”

“Yes...I wish every day was this nice.”

“Yeah...ugh, no, it can’t be! We’re adventurers. We’ll be back on the quests

tomorrow! Don't forget it."

"Hee-hee. I know. Okay, Ma-kun, take a look. Is this how long you want the bangs?"

"Let me see..."

He took the mirror from her and opened his eyes.

Examining himself.

"Mm...I think a little bit shorter."

"How much? Let me show you with the scissors. Is here good?"

"That's too far. Just a little bit more, like, half a mill—hey?!"

He'd spotted someone in the mirror, on the inn porch.

Porta, smiling broadly...and Wise and Medhi patronizingly.

"How long have you been there?!"

"Oops!" *Snip!*

As Masato leaped to his feet, there was a snip...

And quite a lot of hair went fluttering down.

"...Uh...er...?"

"Ack! Masato, your bangs! Ugh, it's 'cause you moved around too much!"

"That one was all you, Masato. RIP."

"Waaay too much. Hmm...but maybe it could work?"

"It definitely says, 'I got my mom to cut this for me.'"

"A hairstyle that screams 'close-knit family.'"

"It could be a whole new you, Masato. You can be a new kind of Hero, one who everyone will know gets haircuts from their mom."

"Go forth, young hero! Get a mom cut!"

The mom cut Hero's adventures had just begun!

"G-get real! I'm taking another day off...or however many it'll take until my

hair grows back! I refuse to leave my room until then! Dammit!”

Masato’s forlorn wails echoed far and wide.

Adventure Report Vol. 3

Author: Porta

.....

Masato's haircut went very wrong, so I made him some emergency extensions! He was so thrilled, he bought me a stuffed animal with his leftover allowance! That made me really happy!

.....



Surveyor: Masumi Shirase

A buzz cut would have done the trick, but such old-fashioned advice would likely upset Masato.

Chapter 4 The Anti-Shoplifting Squad: Mamako's Case File

Those Who Challenge Mothers

With the setting sun at his back, the Hero Masato let out a long sigh.

"...Everyone braced for this?"

In response, the Sage Wise, the Cleric Medhi, and the Traveling Merchant Porta all nodded stiffly. Like Masato, the stress was crushing them.

But they had to do it.

"Ma-kun, don't worry! Mommy's here with you."

Masato's mother, Mamako, was standing next to him, smiling pleasantly.

That smile never changed, even at times like this—and it gave him courage.

"Yes. Mamako's with us, so we'll be fine."

"No matter what trouble awaits, Mamako will make it turn out okay."

"Yes! I trust Mama!"

Ahead of them lay a fight they could not avoid. One that placed their lives on the line.

But they had Mamako. It was time to rely on her power.

The party nodded, and moved out. Setting foot inside the building.

And as they did...!

"Welcome, welcome! We've got savings galore! Oh, adventurers, come in!"

An enthusiastic man wearing a headband made of twisted cloth came toward them.

This was a major grocery store in the Catharn capital.

It was evening. The busiest time of day. Grocery rush hour.

Even the entrance was packed. Housewives, housewives, housewives everywhere the eye could see. Even some househusbands.

Masato's party were instantly buffeted by the crowds, unable to take a step in any direction.

"Crap, we're already done for! I can't! Let's quit while we still can!"

"No giving up, Masato! This is your fault, remember?"

"If we'd finished that quest earlier, we'd have gotten this shopping done at a reasonable hour, before the rush. Remember?" *Smile.*

"I'm sorry I dug my heels in and kept picking away at that boss I couldn't beat! I knew Mom could one-shot it, but I wasted a ton of time trying, and that's totally on me!"

"Ugh, words don't mean *anything*."

"How can we trust anything *you* say?"

"I do actually mean this!"

He couldn't bow his head apologetically—the crowds were so thick, he'd bump into the person in front of him. The body heat alone was enough to give you heatstroke.

Only Mamako remained aplomb.

"Ma-kun, don't let them get you down. Mommy's delighted you came shopping with me!" *Pressss!*

"Great! But we don't need to stand this close! Let's keep our distance here! I'm not gonna say what, but there are bits of you in relentless contact with me!"

"Sorry, but there's so many people here, I can't move! Hee-hee-hee." *Pressss!*

"Argh...then we've just gotta get this shopping done! If we can at least get some of this meat that's on sale, we're good! One pack each!"

Head count. Masato, Mamako, Wise, Medhi. Four people, four packs...

Wait, one missing. "...Whoaaaaa...?!" Through the crowd, he could just make out a pair of hands desperately flailing. "Yikes!" "Porta?!" Wise and Medhi managed to grab hold and yank her free before she was lost in the madding crowd.

Emphasis on mad.

“I suppose moving as a group is a tall order...,” said Mamako.

“Then we’ll take refuge nearby. Cool?”

“Agreed. The per-person limit on meat requires us to line up at the register.”

“I agree! But...we’re putting this all on you, Mama...”

“That won’t be a problem. I handle crowds like this all the time! Leave it to me.”

“You do? Moms are way too buff. But okay! Take it away.”

Masato looked around, but it was his nose that found them refuge.

A stand offering samples. Placed to avoid the flow of traffic, it even had little tables set up. They were frying something on a hot plate—from the smell, meat.

It smelled great, but the crowd was focused on shopping, so the tables were empty.

“Strategic retreat! Wise, Medhi, Porta! After me!”

““““Yes, sir!””””

Like soldiers into battle! “Sorry, sorry, coming through.” Or whatever the opposite of battle is. They pushed through the crowd and reached their destination!

The middle-aged woman running the sample counter gave them all a smile.

“Welcome! Try one?”

“Oh, yes, please.”

They each took a bite-size piece of bacon. It was good! But hardly enough to satisfy a predinner empty belly. It just made them hungrier.

But at least they were safe. Here, they could stand without touching anyone! As one, they breathed a sigh of relief.

The sample lady chuckled warmly.

“All out shopping together?” she asked.

“That was the idea, but we decided to foist it all on my mom. No way we’re up to shopping in this madness.”

“If you’re not used to shopping at this hour, it can certainly be trying. Where’s your mother now?”

“Over there.”

Masato pointed toward the meat section.

“I need ground beef, and boneless ribs... I do beg your pardon. Oh my! The slabs are rather cheap, too. Excuse me!”

The instant she locked on a target, her hand shot through the jostling crowd and secured it. Mamako’s shopping was too fast for the eye to see!

As if the crowds didn’t even exist, she headed off to the fresh fish counter.

“Golly...the way she handles herself...she’s a match for me in my prime.”

“Er?”

“Heh-heh-heh, don’t mind me. Didn’t realize your mother was *the* Mamako Oosuki. Her shopping technique is magnificent.”

“I dunno if it’s all that...”

“It totally is,” Wise insisted. “C’mon, Masato, you should be proud to be her son.”

“I know, you’re just frustrated that she’s *soooo* much more famous than you’ll ever be.”

“Uh, Medhi? You don’t need to spell that out for me.”

“Grocery stores are where Mama’s at her best! Nobody can match her here!”

“Yeah, I get that... This really is her element. It’s like this place was made for her...”

Masato figured it was okay to sing his mother’s praises sometimes.

“Hmph, don’t make me laugh... This is *my* domain.”

This sudden declaration came from a young man, maybe twenty years old, his mouth hidden beneath a scarf.

He swept past Masato’s party, slipping through the torrential flow of the crowd, headed upstream without bumping a soul, and was out the front doors.

“Gee-whiz. Who was that?!”

“He dodged the crowd like Mama does! Gosh!”

“He’s definitely not your average mover... Did you hear what he said?” Medhi asked.

“Uh... ‘This is my domain,’ I think...?”

It had sounded like a response to their discussion of Mamako’s performance...

Just then:

“Everyone, please! Urgent business, sorry! Coming through! Mind letting me pass? Excuse me!”

A mustachioed guy in an apron came pushing through the crowd, creating quite an uproar.

“Oh, you there! Did you see a man in a scarf?” he asked Masato’s party.

“He whooshed past a minute ago, yeah. Already out the front doors,” Masato replied.

“What? Argh, he got away again?!”

The man fell to his knees, despondent.

“Are you okay there? What happened...?”

“Keep your voice down... That man’s a regular shoplifter!”

He showed them a card. It read: I’VE PURLOINED A PACK OF PORK BELLY. —THE MAN IN THE SCARF

“He’s been targeting our store awhile now... I was hoping to catch him red-handed today! What a shame!”

“Er, calm down. You’re the one raising your voice here! Everyone’s looking. And listening.”

“What choice do we have?! We’ll have to hire guards! Put in a request with the Adventurers Guild... Oh, aren’t you adventurers?”

“Er...uh, well, yeah, we are...,” said Wise.

“We’re affordable, too.” Medhi smiled.

“That makes it quick! Then... Oh, were you in the middle of shopping? Once you finish that up, can you meet up in back? I’ll get the contract ready!”

Medhi’s smile—beautiful but devious—had snared another victim.

The mustachioed man looked delighted, and he pushed his way through the crowd toward the back office.

“Medhi...”

“What? We’re helping out. It’s our heroic duty.”

“Yeah, but first we gotta negotiate our fee,” said Wise. “You sure have a lotta nerve... But not like I’m against it, either...”

“Shoplifting is bad! I don’t like it!”

“Yup. Right, let’s meet up with Mom, pay for our groceries, and hit up the back room. But first...”

Masato turned to the sample counter, hoping another bite of bacon would silence his belly.

“...Huh?”

But the entire stand was gone, along with the woman minding it.

Only the smell of frying bacon lingered in the air.

“Um, what? Where’d the sample counter go?” said Wise.

“You’re right,” said Medhi. “That lady’s gone, too...”

“Maybe her shift ended while we were talking to the mustachioed man?” suggested Porta.

“But you’d think we’d have noticed her packing up. Did you hear anything at all?”

She’d been an arm’s length away yet had packed up the entire stand without a sound and then beaten a hasty retreat through crowded aisles?

That seemed blatantly impossible.

“This is way too weird.”

“Yes, so strange.”

“Right...wait, augh! Mom?! Where’d you come from?!”

Mamako was standing right next to him, holding a basket piled high with groceries. She definitely hadn’t been there a second before.

“You’re just as bad, Mom...”

“Does this mean that sample lady is, like, on Mamako’s level?”

“If she’d raised her shopping skill to the extreme and added some unique movement ability on top of it...well, then it might start to make sense.”

“Moving like Mama does is incredible! I respect her!”

“Adding in the mom factor, huh...? Yeah, I can see it.”

The party all nodded, accepting this as gospel.

Their shopping complete, they were true to their word and repaired to the back room.

They were led through a basic office space with functional partitions and were met by the mustachioed man.

“Hi, pardon us. We spoke earlier...”

“Yes, there you are! I was waiting... Hmm? ...Is that Mamako Oosuki?! Huh? Why are *you* here?!”

“My son, Ma-kun, said he’d been asked to help with security. So I thought if possible, I’d like to help, too!”

“My! Mamako, helping us out? What an honor! Our victory is assured! Splendid!”

He seemed pleased.

“Masato, how’s it feel?” asked Wise.

“My mom basically showed up to my job interview and got hired instead of me.”

“So in a word...impotent?” said Medhi.

“Yeah. That.”

Wiping the tears before they fell, he mustered a valiant smile.

Recovering.

“Anyway, as for the job itself...well, first, I suppose I should introduce myself! I’m the owner of this store. My staff call me the Mustachioed Grocer.”

“Very literal.”

“Ha-ha-ha. Well, that’s nicknames for you! First, have a look at these.”

Mustachioed Grocer laid out some documents in front of them.

They had a month’s worth of dates, each of which had multiple product names listed below.

And then phrases like *Bespectacled Youth*, *Bandanna Babushka*, and *Straw-Hat Kid*.

“Uh...”

“A chart of the shoplifter’s crimes. Infuriatingly, they always leave a card at the scene, so we know exactly what was swiped.”

“And at least one thing is taken every day, without respite...,” said Mamako.

“There’s no set time, but they always arrive eventually.”

“What’re these phrases?” Wise asked.

“The names given on the cards, calling us out. ‘I arrived in this guise but you failed to notice! Mwa-ha-ha!’ Absolutely infuriating.”

“So we’re up against a master of disguise, are we? If they can swap genders and ages at will, they may be using transformation magic,” said Medhi.

“Is there anything else you can tell us?” Porta asked.

“Hmm...oh, maybe...”

Mustachioed Grocer frowned.

“Since it all started, our balances have been off.”

“Off...?”

“They’re coming in over our actual sales—by the exact price of what was stolen. But I can’t imagine that has anything to do with it! The shoplifter would hardly go leaving payment now, would they?”

“Yeah, if they did...why not just buy it like a normal person?”

“Exactly! So I suppose this is all the information I have. Now, they’ve already hit us today, so your guard duties will start tomorrow. Please sign here.”

He really did have the contracts ready. One for each of them.

“Very by the book...,” said Masato.

“It’s a requirement, after all. Oh, Mamako, would you mind signing this, too?”

“Hmm? What’s this one for?”

“Oh, nothing major! The rest of your party are still minors, so they need the consent of a parent or guardian—just assume it’s one of those approval forms.”

“That is important! Glad you’re doing things properly. Where do I sign...?”

“Right here.”

Mustachioed Grocer took off his apron and held it out.

“Um...you mean...”

“I hate to say this to my new boss, but...get it together, man.”

“Please! Mamako, I need your autograph! Right here!”

He was on his hand and knees, begging—faaaaar too intense about it.

The next day...

The party left the inn and headed straight for the store.

They poked their heads in the back and found everyone hustling to process newly arrived merchandise. Mustachioed Grocer was wearing his autographed apron, and he met them with a blissful smile.

“Welcome, everyone! I’ve been waiting breathlessly!”

“Nice to be here. I imagined we’d be guarding right away, but...you aren’t open yet?”

“No, there’s still some time before we do. Feel free to wait in the office area... Oh, but first...”

He scanned the party, thinking.

“Um, are we not dressed for the part?” Masato asked.

“That is a concern. We do have adventurer customers, but...not a lot...”

“So worst-case scenario, the other customers will be giving us fishy looks?” said Wise.

“If we can send a clear message that this store has guards and is ready to prevent theft, it might discourage the shoplifter from taking action at all,” said Medhi.

“But if that scares the other customers, nobody will want to shop here,” added Porta. “That would be bad!”

“Then how about we disguise ourselves?” Mamako suggested.

The Mustachioed Grocer pounced as if he’d been waiting for this.

“So you agree! ...I thought this might happen, so I’ve prepared just the thing!”

He dashed into the office and came back with grocer’s aprons.

One each for Masato, Wise, Medhi, and Porta. Just the aprons.

“So we pretend we’re working here while actually guarding? Safe enough.”

“While you’re patrolling, you can straighten up the aisles or help restock; that’ll help you blend in. I won’t insist you do that, naturally. I won’t!” *Grin.*

“He’s appealing to our better natures in an attempt to avoid fair compensation.”

“Ma-kun, Mommy didn’t get an apron...”

“Don’t worry, Mamako. I’ve prepared a different disguise for you. Voilà!”

The Mustachioed Grocer whipped open a massive trunk they’d just wheeled in.

Inside was a full complement of outfits, from normal villager garb to evening gowns, nurses’ uniforms, shrine maiden robes, plush mascot outfits—anything you could want.

Masato stared daggers at Mustachioed Grocer, who avoided his gaze.

“Did you spare a second’s thought to the psychological damage this

cosplaying mom would incur on her son?"

"Nobody cares what her son thinks. Ha-ha-ha!"

"Want me to *make you?*" *Crack, crack.*

"Calm down! I'm not asking for a private fashion show here. Far from it! It's just...Mamako's rather famous! A casual disguise would soon be discovered, and there'd be a riot!"

"Fair enough. It *is* Mamako."

"With Mamako here, the shoplifter might well be scared off and get away clean."

"I think Mama needs to disguise herself so we can catch the crook!"

The girls were all making sense. "How's this?" "I like this one." "Oh, this is cute!" But clearly crook-capturing was not first on their minds.

Meanwhile, the woman herself...

"Okay, Ma-kun. Mommy will surprise you with her disguise! Just you wait!"

"Please...please don't lose track of our goals here... Please!"

She was more excited than anyone, and that was terrifying.

It was time for the store to open. Their watch began.

"Oh, welcome! Uh...take your time, enjoy shopping with us!"

Masato was mopping by the door and wound up greeting the first customer of the day.

A middle-aged woman. Likely a housewife. She bobbed her head and hurried on by.

Nothing unusual. Seemed like a normal customer. But maybe...?

...No, probably not.

No basis for that thought, but he just instinctively deemed her safe and let the first customer by.

Next came a young man in a beret.

He seemed about the same age as the man who'd passed them yesterday, but the face was a completely different shape.

But their opponent was a master of disguise. Perhaps...?

Maybe. But maybe not. Still...

Pretending to clean, he followed.

The beret man looked around shiftily. Suspicious.

Maybe this is our target? Let's try poking him.

If he was right, then what? He'd likely resist. Then combat?

Masato didn't have a sword on him. He'd have to fight with a mop—which did not have much attack power.

And his only defense was this staff apron. If his foe came at him with a blade, he might well die instantly.

Ugh...my life's already on the line?!

The beret man didn't know Masato was on his tail. Should he attack first?

If he got the drop on him with the mop, he might be able to wrap this up easily. His grip tightened, waiting for his moment...

And then a cabbage bounced off the side of his head. The heart of that was quite hard, and it hurt.

"Gah...! Wh-what was that?! A suspect?!"

"You're the only suspicious one here!"

The cabbage culprit was Wise. She'd been stacking vegetables like a typical employee.

"You're trying too hard!" she said. "Just act natural! Geez."

"R-right, sorry... Guess I got a bit carried away."

"And you cleaned the front too much. Make sure you clean every inch of the place! I'll watch the front, don't worry. Oh, welcome!"

Wise was already giving the next customer a friendly smile.

But her hands never stopped stacking. As smoothly as any real employee.

“...You’re weirdly good at that.”

“Yeah, I’ve worked grocery jobs before.”

“Oh. That explains it. Huh.”

Masato had never had a job, so he’d clearly lost this round, and he backed off.

He left the veggie section, went through the meat and fish areas, and found himself by the deli. Working the main paths with his mop as he went.

The stands of prepackaged sides were still empty, but he found the beret man standing nearby.

“Uh, sorry, where are the spices?” the man asked an employee.

“Spices are in the center of the store, on the shelves—there should be a sign above the shelf to help you track them down.”

“A sign above... Oh, I see them now! Thank you.”

Medhi was busy assisting him.

When the beret man walked away, Masato snuck up to her.

“Medhi, you’re awfully good at this. Not your first time in a grocery store gig?”

“I’ve certainly never worked anywhere like this. I simply answered the question I was asked.”

“Oh, okay...that’s easier said than done...”

“It’s easily done. You just act normal, and do what you can. You tend to overthink these things, Masato. Try to relax. I’ve got to get the sample stand ready—”

“Wait, let’s not be hasty!”

He couldn’t let Medhi *cook*! If she created another Mysterious Object X, people might die!

But when he tried to stop her, she shot him her most beautiful smile and stomped on his toe. This hurt a lot.

“I am merely setting up the stand. The actual cooking will be done by the person in charge, never fear.” *Grind, grind.*

“Oh, okay. Whew. Glad to hear it. That hurts. I’m sorry! I’m sorry!”

“The note of genuine relief in your voice made it worse, but that aside, there’s one thing I’m concerned about.” *Grind, grind.*

“...And that would be?”

Medhi frowned, not easing the pressure on his foot one iota.

“According to the owner, this shop only offers samples here, in the deli. They’ve never offered anything like that elsewhere in the store.”

“Er...but they had one in the meat section yesterday. The one that vanished...”

“Exactly. That’s my point. Several customers thanked them for offering meat samples yesterday...but the owner has never once arranged anything like that.”

“So...what does that mean?”

“That’s my question.”

Neither knew, so they stood there looking puzzled together.

Then there was the sound of glass shattering in the center aisle.

“That sounds bad. I’ll go check it out!”

This was a job for Masato! He dashed off, mop in hand.

Looking right and left, scanning the shelves for the scene of the crime—there! The drinks corner! Broken bits of bottle all over the floor and a puddle of citrus-scented juice!

An extremely flustered older woman was talking to a very small staff member.

“I’m so sorry! It was an accident!”

“I understand! I’ll clean this up! Leave it to me!”

“Oops, already taken care of.”

Porta was on the case. She had a broom and a dustpan and was gathering up the glass shards.

Masato joined her.

“Good job, Porta...I mean, ma’am, are you all right? You didn’t cut yourself or anything?”

“Oh no, nothing like that. I’m really terribly sorry. My cart just bumped it somehow... I didn’t mean to knock it off the shelf!”

“O-oh, of course not. Please, don’t worry about it. We’ve got this covered. And, uh, as far as paying for it goes...”

“What?! It was an accident, but you’re going to charge me for it?!”

“Urp...w-well...”

Were they? This woman certainly seemed furious, and Masato wasn’t sure.

Porta took over.

“We don’t charge for accidents! The owner said so!”

“Oh, really? Well, this was certainly an accident! If you’ll excuse me.”

The woman looked relieved and quickly left.

They got the glass cleaned up, mopped the juice, and were done.

“Thanks, Porta. You handled that well.”

“I did!”

“But I sure didn’t... Gotta get on the ball here...” He slumped.

“Yes, you completely blew that, Masato. Mad points lost.”

“You can’t just suggest they pay for things! An utter failure.”

“Sorry. But you two didn’t need to come all this way to chew me out...wait...”

It wasn’t just Wise and Medhi. Mustachioed Grocer and the rest of the staff were all lurking nearby, watching over the scene.

That was a lot of reproachful glares, and Masato was soon mortified.

.....Mm? Huh? Wait a sec...

Every employee was gathered here.

“What’s with this aisle? The products aren’t even arranged evenly! A

disgrace!”

“The spouts on these bottles shouldn’t be facing into the aisle!”

“No wonder it caught on her cart! I’ll fix these right away!”

More than a few drinks were turned the wrong way, primed for accidents...

Masato’s eyes widened.

“Crap! This was a trap! They wanted a loud noise to make everyone come running!”

The girls—and the Mustachioed Grocer—all winced at this and sprang into action.

The shoplifter was likely in the act right now.

The regular staff all went back to their positions, on the alert for suspicious activities. Best to leave things to them.

“We’ll block the exits!” Masato called. “There are several, right?”

“First, the front entrance and exit.”

“There’s a chance they’ll slip out the employee exit! There’s also one by the deli and another between the meat and fish departments!”

“And one by the veggies! That’s five exits!”

“And four of us... If only there was a fifth... Has anyone seen Mom?”

“She said she’d be here as soon as she changed, but I haven’t spotted her yet!” said Wise.

“Geez, what’s she up to?”

The four of them would have to try and cover everything. Who should go where?

Masato was about to divvy up the exits when...

“This is what you were looking for, right? It’s a bit cheaper than usual. Score!”

Mamako’s voice, as pleasant and calm as it always was.

From the next aisle.

“There she is... Hey, Mom!”

Masato quickly rounded the corner, and there she stood. Mamako.

Mamako, dressed as a mysterious nun, smiling at the man in the beret as he reached for some flour.

Mysterious nun Mamako. With no mental guards in place against this, Masato felt a sudden pain in his head and nearly died.

“...Why...of all things...would you choose *that*?”

“Oh, Ma-kun! What do you think of my disguise? I’ve always wanted to try it out, so I thought, now’s my chance! How do like that infooormation? Hee-hee!”

“It’s definitely too much infooormation, but we’ve got bigger problems here...!”

“Er, sorry,” said the beret guy. “I just remembered something, so I’ve gotta run—can I get through?”

“Oh, but of course! I’m ever so sorry! Go right ahead.”

He slipped between Mamako and Masato with his head down, clutching the bag of flour.

Masato watched him go. He went to the registers, paid, and was out the front door.

“Ma-kun, if he pays, he’s a real customer, right?”

“Yeah. At least that guy was. But someone’s out there shoplifting right this instant! I’d love to make you change, but we don’t have time! Mom, be on the lookout!”

“Oh my! Then Mommy will get to work.”

They spread out, covering the escape routes.

Meanwhile, in the alley behind the store...

“Drat...my timing was perfect! How’d she know?”

The beret man flung the flour to the ground and whipped a card out of his pocket.

I'VE PURLOINED A BAG OF FLOUR. —BERET BEATNIK.

But he'd been thwarted and unable to pull off this crime.

Gritting his teeth, he tore up the card.

"So that's Mamako Oosuki! The stories were true. She's no ordinary mother! This could be a problem. But on the other hand...it's a real chance to prove my skill!"

With a sinister smirk, the beret beatnik slipped into the shadows.

Time passed. It was almost noon.

After a brief break (in compliance with labor regulations), Masato's party was back on the floor.

"We didn't catch anyone, but...safe to assume we prevented the crime?"

"Probably. We haven't found a card, after all."

"This culprit seems to prioritize style, so if we find no evidence, we know their act was thwarted—but they may yet try again."

"They shoplift every single day! We can't let our guard down!"

"Yep. So..."

Masato tugged the strings of his apron tight, ready for anything.

During the commotion earlier, they'd been lacking in numbers, but that problem was handled.

Mamako had joined the four kids.

"Let's all keep watch together! Do anything naughty, and Mommy will arrest you!"

She blew her whistle. Mamako was dressed as a policewoman—in a miniskirt, her long legs in tights.

"That's literally *just* cosplay... I knew this would happen... *Sigh...*"

"Gosh, Ma-kun! You're sighing a lot. Are you tired? Cheer up!" *Toot.*

"You wear me out more than anyone, Mom. And stop tweeting that whistle!"

“Oh, sorry.” *Sad toot.*

“Argh!”

Mamako seemed to really like that whistle. Whatever.

Back on patrol.

There were a lot more customers in the store now. It was just before lunch, so the deli was particularly packed, everyone buying the boxed lunches.

“According to the owner’s documentation, at this hour, they tend to go for lunches,” said Wise.



“Shoplifting elsewhere is difficult; you never know who’s watching. We’re probably safe to focus on the deli,” said Medhi.

“Cool, let’s merge with the crowds, and watch for any shoplifters...or that was the plan...”

But when they got to the deli...

It was all men.

“Hey, quit pushin’! You got a death wish?”

“Outta my way! You won’t be my first kill!”

“That’s *my* barbecue bento box! You want some?! Come at me!”

Muscles bulging everywhere, a stampede of manual laborers were tussling for their lunches. It was like a riot. They seemed ready to smash the deli, and possibly the entire store.

The blood drained from the party’s faces.

“If...we set one foot in there...we’d be done for...,” Masato whimpered.

“But we’ve gotta keep watching! I’m gonna try and slip through and keep an eye on things!”

“No, wait, Porta! It’s too dangerous! You’ll be crushed to death!” cried Wise.

“Let’s just watch from the sidelines! It’s our only option!” said Medhi.

But from the outskirts, it was impossible to see past the wall of muscles.

Dang! This is perfect cover for a shoplifter!

They might be in the act right now, behind that pile of men! Slipping a lunch under their shirt! Masato was tearing his hair at the thought.

But then a piercing whistle rang out.

“Now, now, no fighting! You’re all good boys! Line up!” *Toot, toot!*

“Yo, what’s with this mom lady?”

Miniskirt Mom Cop was on the scene. Toot-tooting away on her whistle, conducting traffic in the deli aisle.

But the hungry men were in a rage! They'd never obey—

“You're kidding? That's Mamako!”

“Line up, fellas! If we're good boys here, good things'll come our way!”

“Hee-hee-hee. Then Officer Mommy will help hand out lunches! Make sure you buy a veggie to go with your meal!”

“““Aye-aye!”””

The muscle-bound men all became good boys and formed neat lines. Miniskirt Mom Cop began handing out lunches.

“Well, that was fast. No more chaos,” said Wise.

“That's our Mamako. Masato, you're up,” said Medhi.

“I refuse to join that line. What could be sadder than getting lunch from your cop cosplay mom? ...Mm?”

It was pure chance that he noticed.

A battle-scarred, tough-looking dame near the front of the line reached out to grab a pack of veggies—but just before she did, Mamako picked it up and handed it to someone else.

So did the scarred lady get nothing?

Masato thought for a second then called out.

“Er, excuse me? Were you about to—”

“Huh? Oh, no, I just...I thought if I did something naughty, then the mom cop would have to arrest me! I'd be punished! Couldn't resist the urge.”

“Oh, okay. You're one of *those*. Got it.”

Seemed she just had a fetish. Best not to get involved.

Masato backed off, watching as the scarred lady took a lunch from Mamako, paid, and left the store.

“Masato, is that your type?” Wise asked.

“Don't be absurd. She just seemed suspicious, but...guess it was nothing.”

Focus on the job. Leaving the deli to Mamako, the others spread out through the store.

“...Damn and blast it! Foiled again!”

The scarred lady ducked into the back alley, tearing up a card. I’VE PURLOINED A VEGGIE PACK! it read, the letters scattering in the wind.

“Even your son has good instincts, eh, Mamako Oosuki? I’ve gotta get real here! Go for my ultimate, guaranteed success plan! Next time... Mwa-ha-ha!”

The scarred woman laughed maniacally, popping the lids on her lunch and the veggie side dish.

Time passed once more, evening arrived—and along with it, the horrors of peak crowds.

A worried-looking Mustachioed Grocer came to check in on Masato.

“Are you sure you’re all right? Legally speaking, we can only work minors so many hours...”

“Oh, is *that* your concern? I mean, that *is* a big deal, but...let us handle it. We’ve come this far, and job or not, we wanna catch this crook, no matter what.”

“Okay. Then I’ll take you at your...aughhhh?!”

“Wh-what is it?! The shoplifter’s back?!”

“I got dirt on my precious aprooooooooooon! Wheeeeeeen?!”

“Duck in back and put some stain remover on it. You’re just in the way here.”

Clutching the apron Mamako had autographed, the grocer ran off, tears trailing in his wake.

Putting that out of his mind, Masato scanned the crowds.

Like the day before, the place was filled to the brim. Unable to move about freely, each party member was stationed at one of the entrances, ready to call out to anyone who tried to bypass the registers.

Wise was at the store entrance, Porta at the veggie corner staff door, Medhi by the deli, and Masato here between the meat and fish departments.

Since Mamako could easily move around through the thickest crowds, they had her prowling the store, ready for anything.

Blending with the crowds shuffling down the main aisles...

“Hee-hee! It’s Mommy, Ma-kun! Did you recognize me?”

“I wish I hadn’t.”

Someone passed by him in a Chinese dress, face mask, and sunglasses, but he pretended not to notice.

Then...

“.....Mm? I smell something good.”

Bacon frying. From the corner of the meat section.

There was a counter set up and a middle-aged woman handing out samples behind it.

“Hey there, how’s it going? We met yesterday, right?”

“Yes, so we did. Would you like to try—?”

“No, I just have a question for you. This store doesn’t actually offer samples outside the deli...”

“That’s right! I don’t actually work here. I’m doing this of my own free will.”

“...And after we met you yesterday, there was a shoplifting incident.”

“My! You certainly are perceptive. Yes—and I can’t claim I wasn’t involved. My being here might well have drawn the attention of the staff and customers.”

She just smiled, not the least bit rattled. Even making it sound like she might be an accomplice.

This lady had nerves of steel. Clearly more than he could handle.

But this was his job. If she was involved in the shoplifting, he’d have to secure her personage.

“Would you mind joining me in the back room for further questioning?”

“Oh! That’s very suspicious!”

“Huh?”

She pointed over his shoulder, and Masato instinctively turned around.

“Ma-kun! Mommy’s right here, yo!”

Mamako was wearing a white button-up shirt and slacks, disguised as a male student, and happily waving back at him.

“Oh, yeah, Mom’s suspicious all right... No, wait! When did you change? And are those my clothes! No, not the time, not the time!”

He hastily turned back, but the sample corner was gone, and the lady with it.

She’d gotten away!

“Dammit! Who are we up against? Raise the security level!”

There was only so much they could do. Masato hurried back to his position, scanning the area.

Driven to catch them, he kept his eyes peeled...

And as he did, rush hour passed, and the shop closed.

After hours, Masato’s party and the rest of the staff searched the store.

“No crime cards found,” said Wise.

“So nothing’s been stolen?” asked Porta.

“If the shoplifter stuck to their policy, then that would be the case,” replied Medhi.

They’d prevented the crime—and their mission was a success. Nice!

But it wasn’t like they’d caught the culprit, so this did not count as a real solution.

“They weren’t able to shoplift, but we failed to catch them. That’s more of a tie...but we do have new info suggesting they might have an accomplice. We should rethink our strategies for tomorrow.”

“Yes, keep up the good work! I’ll prepare your wages for the day. Would you mind waiting here for just a moment?”

“Paying us by the day? That’s pretty cool. I’m starting to like you,

Mustachioed Grocer.”

“Ha-ha-ha! I can’t pay a lot, I’m afraid. But I’ll just duck in back...and while I’m at it, take these to the storehouse.”

He picked up an armful of unsold meat and fish, and turned toward the exit...

But then.

“Oh my! You have to pay for those!” Mamako said.

She was back in her usual outfit and tugging at the grocer’s apron strings.

“Uh, Mamako? I’m just taking product off the shelf...”

“I’ve got a hunch that’s not true! I can tell something’s up here, so I’m not letting you.”

“Mom! That’s his job... Wait.”

Masato glanced down at the grocer’s apron.

It was brand new. No dirt. No Mamako autograph.

“...Grocer, your stain removal went well.”

“Huh? My what?”

“It was a disasterrrrrrrrrrrr! It faded *slightly*, but I can still see iiiiiiiiiiiit! Someone, please save my aprooooooooooon!”

Another Mustachioed Grocer had come bursting through the back door, weeping openly.

And the apron in his hands had Mamako’s autograph on it.

“Uh-oh!”

“Yup, you’re out! Momstincts win again! You’re the shoplifter! Caught red-handed!”

The fake grocer brushed Mamako off, tossed aside the meat and fish, and tried to run for it.

Not happening. Masato flung himself in front of him, trying to grab on...

“You’ve had enough.”

The disappearing-reappearing sample stand lady suddenly dropped down from the rafters, got her arms under the fake grocer's pits, and vaulted away again.

Clinging upside down from the ceiling.

"What the...? Who is *that*? A ninja...er, kunoichi?" said Wise.

"So you were in this together! Let's nab 'em both!" shouted Masato.

"Wait, let me talk! Hear me out and I'll remove the stain from the grocer's apron!"

"Don't be ridiculous. Nobody would accept those terms!"

"You'll do that for me?! E-e-everyone, let's negotiate!"

Mustachioed Grocer was fully on board.

Masato's party were forced to back off a bit. The woman bobbed her head and began: "I'm so sorry for all the trouble my son has caused. As his mother, I'm responsible. Come, say you're sorry!"

"Gah...I-I'm sorry..."

"I take full responsibility for this. I was once a Bandit of some repute. My son admired that side of me and was trying to follow in my footsteps..."

"I'll pull it off next time! I'll be a great Bandit, just like Mommy!"

"How many times have I told you you'll do no such thing?"

"Hngg?!"

The thief-turned-mom slapped the fake owner's backside. There was a puff of smoke, and he transformed into a boy a few years younger than Masato. Clearly his true form.

"My son has been shoplifting to hone his Bandit skills. As his mother, I should have stopped him...but part of me was pleased he admired what I'd done, and I couldn't help but indulge him."

"However pleased you might have been, a crime is still a crime. You ask me, this is a real problem."

“Masato’s right. I’m guessing you hung out in the store, secretly paying for whatever he stole, but that’s sooo self-serving.”

“Oh...so that’s why we always had a surplus on the accounts...”

“I didn’t want this to cause any trouble for the store. That’s also why I ran a sample counter out of my own pocket. My little way of saying sorry. Oh, before I forget, let me keep my word.”

The ex-Bandit mother wagged her finger, beckoning.

And the stain on Mustachioed Grocer’s apron lifted off it, returning to her hands.

“Yikes...what was that?”

“An advanced Bandit skill. Allows you to steal anything you want with a single finger. But that’s also rather self-serving, isn’t it? Here I impulsively leaped in to save my boy, but forgiveness is not so easy to come by.”

“No, I forgive him! I’ll forgive anything!”

““Huh?””

Grocer was sobbing with joy, absolving one and all.

“Grocer, are you sure?”

“It certainly caused a panic, but there was no financial impact...and the sight of such beautiful family ties has moved me greatly! So it’s fine.”

“Okay, but what’s the *real* reason?”

“She fixed Mamako’s autographed apron, and I’m soooooo grateful!”

“Right, I figured. So, uh...”

“B-but...are you all sure?”

The ex-Bandit glanced at Mamako.

Mamako smiled pleasantly.

“Shoplifting is bad! But if no real harm was caused, and the person in charge is willing to forgive, I think that’s all there is to it. The rest is between you and your son.”

“Then I’ll take Grocer up on his generous offer. And as for my boy’s education...what say I haul him to the Mom Shop?”

“We’d love to have you! We’ll have so much to talk about!”

“And I’ll wind up being the real victim here. Please, don’t do this...,” begged Masato.

“Heh-heh-heh. I’ll look forward to it! ...Well, until we meet again.”

The thief mother vanished into thin air.

“Whoa! She disappeared!” cried Porta.

“That skill level seems a little beyond ‘some repute,’” said Wise.

“More like she’s a living legend,” said Medhi. “Either way, our job is done.”

“Yes. Good work, everyone! Job complete.”

“Just gotta say our good-byes. Everyone—”

But before Masato could finish, Mustachioed Grocer interrupted with a flood of tears.

“Do come again! Please, please come agaiiiiiiiin!”

Adventure Report Vol. 4

Author: Wise

.....

So when we were on the case, I was stacking veggies and stuff, and this other part-timer came over and was like, "You're good at this! You've got a promising career in this business." Like, totally gushing over me. See? I really AM good at something. Hah!

.....



Surveyor: Masumi Shirase

I think it's a fine career option.
We'll be sorry to see you go.

Chapter 5 True Story? A Family-and-Party Adventure

Documentary

The real world, Japan. Present day. An office in the city.

Masumi Shirase, surveyor for the Cabinet Office Policy Division (Department of Policy on Cohesive Society), was staring at the paperwork on her desk, mulling it over.

“What to do...?”

The paperwork was a proposal regarding advertising for the government-run online game, *MMMMMMORPG* (working title), currently in a closed beta, making progress toward the official launch.

Using mystery full-dive tech, it sent the players into a world of swords and sorcery—literally.

As a member of the admin staff, she’d been asked for her take on how best to spread the word.

“I think this is a job for our PR team, but if the request has come to me...then they want to get *those two* involved. Very well. We’ll do just that. Heh-heh-heh.”

This was extremely presumptive. She had neither consulted nor obtained permission from the mother and child she was referring to.

But that was hardly an issue.

Shirase picked up a ballpoint pen and quickly filled out the attached application.

“This game requires units composed of at least one parent and one child. We must inform people of the parental accompaniment in no uncertain terms. As my name is Shirase, and *shirase* means ‘inform’!”

And that required the participation of the game’s star unit.

Mamako Oosuki, the Normal Hero’s Mother—a woman of such youthful

exuberance, you would never imagine she had a son in high school.

And her son, Masato Oosuki, the Normal Hero.

“With Mamako at the fore, the Hero will be undermined, and Masato out of sorts...and we’re barely explaining anything...but no matter. Merely a technicality, on a paperwork level. Heh-heh-heh.”

That was a loaded smile. She kept writing.

The heroic family’s party were included as well.

The high school Sage, Wise, outgoing and snide, able to sling spells on the rare occasions her magic wasn’t sealed.

As comforting as any pet, the party’s number one go-getter, the adorbs twelve-year-old Traveling Merchant, Porta.

And the white magic, black heart specialist, high school Cleric, Medhi—her beautiful smile concealing the sinister churn within.

All necessary; necessity, too, was a mother.

“And last but not least, my own name—as the mysterious nun who supports the party from the shadows. That should do it!”

She finished writing, read over the form, and nodded.

“We must let the world know how great this game is...and to that end, this plan must be approved. Yes, all for the success of our marketing.”

Shirase flipped to the final page of the proposal.

To the terms of the company-wide contest...

And the bonus offered to the winning marketing plan.

“No, that’s not the point! I am merely suggesting that informing everyone about the heroic family’s exploits is the best way to communicate this game’s appeal. Heh-heh-heh.”

That bonus would pay for a nice vacation with her daughter—but Shirase smiled, as if that was the farthest thing from her mind.

Inside the game, at a major starting location in the Kingdom of Catharn: A

castle of soaring white walls surrounded by buildings of wattle and daub—old, but with a real warmth. Like many medieval Mediterranean towns, it was a sight to behold.

When a gust of wind passed, colorful flowers swayed, as did the new green leaves, the dew glittering like jewels in the sun.

On this morning, an inn room in the center of the capital...

“Ma-kun, it’s morning! Wake up!”

“...Mmph...”

The voice sounded distant at first, but it was getting steadily closer.

“Ma-kun! Ma-kun! It’s morning!”

“...Oh...yeah...”

It was right by his ear now. A sweet, familiar voice. Masato shifted...

And opened his eyes. The room was already bright.

“You just won’t get up, huh? Well, Mommy’s gonna have to use a little morning magic! Mm...mwah!”

“Don’t do that! Parry!”

Just before her lips touched his cheek, Masato rolled over and fell out of bed. A narrow escape!

Across the bed was his mother, Mamako—smiling happily.

“Goodness, Ma-kun! It’s nothing to be embarrassed about.”

“That’s not the problem here! I’ve told you over and over not to wake me up like that!”

“You have? But you used to love it when you were little...”

“That was a long time ago! I’m almost an adult now! Please, at least treat me like one!”

“Hee-hee-hee. Very well. I’ll give it some thought.”

“Why wait?! No time like the present!”

Mamako's smile was filled with love, and a complete lack of understanding of her son's difficult age. He had to be clear, and firm.

Masato got up, adjusting the collar of his pajamas, ready to launch into a lecture.

"Okay, cut! Cameras, stop rolling."

"Huh?"

That was Shiraaase's voice. Masato turned around and found the mysterious nun behind him.

Outside the window.

And next to her was a stagehand clad all in black, carrying a giant shell with a lens—like a workplace video camera.

And behind them stood another stagehand, with a microphone on a long pole—a boom mic.

"...Hmm."

Masato wasn't against having more typical overblown reactions like screeching or yelling, "What the hell?!"

But Shiraaase was always so unflappable, he decided to treat this latest tomfoolery in kind.

"Oh, Shiraaase. Good morning. Could you tell me how you're outside the window like that? This is the third floor."

"Levitation magic—is what I'd like to say, but actually we just put up a scaffolding. No further questions? Then let's resume filming."

"You can't just wrap things up like that! Expla—no, infoorm me exactly what we're filming!"

"As I am Shiraaase, infoorming is my job...but blurting out my line before I do is most vexing, so I shall not be infoorming you of anything. Hmph."

"Argh, don't sulk! I'm sorry!"

"Not an issue. Masato, back in bed. Sleep once more."

Shiraaase turned her back on him, still clearly sulking.

Awkward puns based on her name were just that important to her.

“Mamako, if you could start the scene from the top?”

“Very well. Take two! Hee-hee.”

“No, wait... You know what’s going on, Mom? Fill me in!”

“S-sorry, Ma-kun. But don’t worry! Mommy isn’t trying to trick or hurt you.”

There were tears welling up in her eyes. Mamako wiped them and ran off into the hall. Back to her starting location.

“Get yourself ready, Masato. Hurry!”

“No, like, you need to tell me what I’m doing here...”

“If you insist, I can infoorm you. However, it will take the better part of an hour to convey the details.”

“That’s...a long time.”

“And once I’ve explained, we still have an hour of waking up to shoot. Then we shall relocate to the dining hall and set up there to film breakfast scenes... which means breakfast will be in two or three hours, or possibly tomorrow.”

“Okay, tomorrow is clearly an exaggeration, but yeah...if Mom’s up here, then she’s not getting breakfast ready. So...best to get this over with...”

“I leave it up to you whether you accept her wake-up kiss or not. The start of a beautiful in-game day for a mother and her child. Imagine how the child would wake up in that scenario. Positions!”

“Argh, fine, I get it. I’ll do it! I’ll let her do it.”

His grumbling stomach drove him to it. And guilt over robbing Shiraaase of the pun that defined her character. As ordered, Masato slunk back into bed.

Naturally, he dodged the wake-up kiss. Acting like a normal son would to a doting mother in the morning.

At last, it was time for breakfast.

Laid out atop a Western-style table was rice, miso soup, fried salmon, raw

eggs, seaweed, pickled veggies, and of course, chopsticks.

“Camera, get coverage of these place settings. Focus on their fingers...mindful of the core purpose... Oh, a close-up of Mamako placing the soup bowls.”

“Who should I give them to? The children aren’t here yet...” said Mamako.

“We’ll film you handing it off later. First, your angle. Eyes on the camera.”

“Got it. Then...here you go. Eat up!” *Smile.*

“Augh, the steam hid your face! One more.”

The camera and mic operators moved nimbly around, following Shiraaase’s directions.

Meanwhile, the kids were dressed and on standby in the hall.

“Ooh! They’re really filming! What’s going on? Masato, tell us!”

“Sorry, Porta, I’m as lost as you are.”

“What? Get it together, Masato! ...Geez, a surprise film shoot? God, that’s so annoying.”

“I can’t believe we weren’t at least warned in advance. I demand to speak to the person in charge.”

Porta was excitedly watching the filming, eyes sparkling. Meanwhile...

Wise and Medhi were furiously busy, makeup kits out, poring over every detail. Curling their lashes, primping their hair, practicing looks in their mirrors.

“...For all your griping, you two sure are into this.”

“Um, what? No I’m not.”

“I would never embarrass myself like that. I have standards. There are limits, of course, so...don’t strain yourself, Wise.”

“Wait, what does that...Medhi! That’s my lipstick! Who said you could use it?!”

“Wise, be quiet. We’re filming.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know! But seriously!”

Lips painted with a fresh summer shade, Medhi blew her a kiss. Turning red, Wise raised a fist...

“Very well, children! You’re on. This way!”

““Comiiing! Hi, everyone!””

The instant they got their cue from Shiraaase, both girls put on their sunniest smiles. Cute, trying way too hard. Into the dining room.

“I’d call it pandering, but...Porta, we’d better join them.”

“Okay! ...Ohhh...now I’m nervous...”

Masato surreptitiously fixed Porta’s bed head as they went in.

He lined up next to Mamako, the girls across the table.

“““““Hokay!”””””

All five sat down on the chairs...on their knees. Ready to begin!

“Okay, everybody. Just act normally! Relax and eat your breakfast. Ready... action!”

“What do we always say before we eat? Hands together now!”

“““““Thanks for the food!”””””

Filming had begun.

And the camera was on Masato.

I’m up! Already! ...Don’t stress it! Act natural!

His moment to seize the limelight! Everything riding on his performance! Masato...

...took a sip from his bowl.

“Mom, the miso soup is magnificent this morning.”

“Hee-hee. Thank you. But...Ma-kun, that’s not your soup. That’s your rice.”

“Ack...I can’t believe I actually did that...”

He was so nervous, he ended up grabbing the wrong bowl!

Shiraaase’s glare was actively painful. The girls’ giggles were like needles in his

ears. Infuriating.

But a moment later, the camera was on them.

“Eaugh?! It’s coming our way! Er, uh...tastes great!”

Wise raised a fist high!

And immediately realized how disastrous that was. She turned red, head down, no longer moving.

“Wise, you haven’t even taken a bite yet. Get it together. Like me. Perfectly calm. Porta, could you pass the ketchup?”

“Er...ketchup on salmon?”

“...The soy sauce.”

Despite the painful blunder, Medhi maintained her lovely smile...and didn’t make another move. She was finished.

With three participants already down, Shiraaase sighed.

“Apocalyptic. We’ll have to fix it in editing somehow. That’s enough breakfast footage. Crew, take a break. We’ll be back for more later.”

Shiraaase gave them a surreptitious wink.

The black-clad stagehands nodded, made ninja signs with their hands, and vanished. Some very unique NPCs.

“A break from filming! Ms. Shiraaase, why don’t you join us?” Mamako asked.

“I’d be delighted to.”

Shiraaase slipped in next to Masato, making the knees-on-chair thing look elegant, and proceeded to inhale food like a passing tornado.

Masato, Wise, and Medhi exchanged glances, nonverbally agreed it would be best to pretend their blunders hadn’t happened, and resumed their meals.

“...So, Shiraaase, what is this shoot about?”

“You are all participating in the creation of a commercial for this game. I can infoorm you now that we are filming scenes of your lives here.”

“A commercial? See, you can explain this in a word. You said it would take the

better part of an hour!”

“Explaining the details would take that long, but...well, you wouldn’t have the patience for that, so I’ll omit the nitty-gritty on the company contest I’m benefitting from. Pay no heed.”

“You started muttering there, but...sure, fine. Mom, you just accepted this without asking us?”

Masato shot Mamako a look, not super pleased with this.

She put her chopsticks down, bowing her head.

“I know I should have said something. I’m sorry to spring this on you.”

“Saying sorry doesn’t really fix the issue here...”

“Masato, I’m the one who asked she keep it secret. We wanted to catch you in your natural state, without pretense. Mamako simply acquiesced to that request.”

“Get it, Masato? Mamako can’t say no to a request! She’s *nice*. Deal with it.”

“Exactly, Masato. I know it came as a surprise, but is it actually a problem? I certainly take care never to do anything I’d be ashamed of a stranger seeing.”

“Masato! I’m not mad about it being secret! I’m fine!”

Shiraaase, Wise, Medhi, Porta—everyone pelted him with Mamako-supporting fire, scoring a direct hit on the unpleasant feelings welling up inside him, shattering them.

His friends had saved him before he could explode. He was quietly grateful.

“...Yeah, I guess. Hard for us to act normal if you explain it up front. If we know you’re filming, we get nervous...and act like a few minutes ago. We were better off not knowing.”

“Ma-kun...you forgive me?”

“I dunno if it’s about forgiveness. I mean...it was a big help, so...let’s call it good. The end!”

“Ma-kun!”

The cloud left Mamako's face, and she beamed.

And her entire body began to glow!

"Ma-kun, thank you!" *Gleeeam!*

"Gah, too bright! Mom! Quit activating A Mother's Light out of nowhere!"

"But Mommy's just so happy! I'm so happy, I start to glow! Ma-kun, can I get a cuddle?"

"You don't need to act out your joy! Mmph?!"

Her arms were already wrapped around his head, drawing him to her chest. "Augh!" "Hee-hee-hee! My son is so nice!" Squeezing. Head rubbed. Mom's delight.

Squinting against the light, his party looked relieved. Family crisis averted.

"Then we're all cool with the shoot, too. But there's one thing bugging me..."

"Yes, the more chances people get to act, the more there is to film...so it's transparently obvious who will command the bulk of the attention."

"Yes! It will be all Mama!"

"Yeah. That the plan, Shiraaase?"

"No, we must not be too hasty. Party members other than Mamako may manage to grab the limelight if they try hard enough."

"Huh? You mean that?"

"Mamako is already participating in many marketing efforts. Which means... you guessed it. It might be time to introduce a few new characters. We haven't *not* considered the possibility, at least."

""""Ooh.""""

Wise, Medhi, and Masato—now free of Mamako's hug—all jumped on that.

"So we've got a solid chance. This is getting interesting."

"Play our cards right, and we might yet snare a lead. Mwa-ha-ha."

"At last I will be confirmed as the true heroine. Heh-heh-heh."

“Um, I’m a little lost...but I’ll try real hard!”

“The children appear motivated. Good. I said we were on break, but actually, the camera crew are just hidden, filming you all in secret. So go ahead and make your marks.”

“Seriously? Why didn’t you tell us?!”

The battle had already begun. Target: Mamako. Party members: Rivals.

In the furious struggle for the top, a clean start would make all the difference!

“Right, then...”

“Well, since everyone’s excited, let’s have a fun adventure! Whoo!”

“Argh, Mom! I keep telling you, it’s my job to say these things! ...Crew, let’s shoot that scene again! Please!”

But Mamako always beat him to it. Spirits unflagging, they set out in search of adventure!

“Ma-kun, I’m ready now! It took ages to change, sorry.”

“Change...? But this is how you always dress...”

“I was changing the parts you *can’t* see. A gift from Ms. Shiraaase! Shall we head out?”

They left the inn, Shiraaase in tow. Trying not to be conscious of the unseen camera crew. Heading toward the Adventurers Guild.

That was where every adventurer started their day. There, they took on quests and claimed their rewards once successfully cleared. The usual routine.

“Right, let’s make this a grand adventure! If we all work together, we can even clear a Very Hard quest. Let’s give it a shot!”

“Okay, cut. Camera, that’s *not* how Masato acts,” said Wise. “It’s a total put-on.”

“Appalling,” said Medhi. “What a shallow hero. I thought better of you.”

“Sure, I don’t usually talk like that. It might not fit the concept of filming our usual selves. But come on! Let’s not make this fight about undermining each

other.”

“Eep! Masato, big problem!”

“Oh, what’s wrong, Porta? Problems? For the Hero to solve?! I’m on the case!”

His chance to shine! Masato hastily fixed his hair and put a hand on the hilt of his blade.

Putting his best game face on, he looked where Porta pointed, and he saw...

“My, an early bird morning sale? Goodness! Fresh food, at such low prices!”

“To ensure the children eat well, you never miss a deal. Most impressive.”

“Mom! You don’t have to do *everything* like always! Don’t encourage her, Shiraase! Get back here! We’re going to the guild!”

He dragged Mamako away from the grocers before she could change their adventure into a shopping expedition. Crisis averted. That could have been a disaster.

The guild was just ahead.

“The Catharn capital guild. I’ve heard Mamako ‘showed off’ here...?”

“Medhi, let us never speak of that again.”

“I can infoorm you that after that incident, we revised the guidebook to say nobody will look down on you, so there’s no need to show off.”

There were no signs remaining of the destruction caused by a single swing of Mamako’s sword. It was a fine building, if a bit café-like.

They bowed to the receptionist and headed for the quest postings.

“Okay, let’s pick a quest. One that’ll allow the hero chosen by the heavens to do something...in other words, one that has flying monsters... Oh, here’s one!”

TAKE DOWN THE FLYING MONSTER. A basic extermination bounty.

Perfect for him! Conscious of the cameras, he dramatically pointed at the posting...

“Whoops, sudden dizzy spell!”

...and Shiraaase slipped in front of him, her hand on the board.

“Accidentally” crumpling up the quest posting he’d been pointing at.

“Yo, Shiraaase! What are you—?!”

“Concerned for my well-being? What a thoughtful hero you are. Splendid. We simply must get this on film.”

“Er, uh...right...I’m concerned for you, Shiraaase—no, wait! This scene was about me finding a good quest! Why are you getting in the way?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Shiraaase was feigning innocence.

“Ha, Masato blew it! Now’s my chance! ...Ooh, this one looks great! Treasure hunting in an ancient ruin? Could be a lot of fun!”

“Argh, I’m not letting you have things your way, Wise... This quest is far better! Gathering ingredients for a beauty potion! We simply must take this on!”

Wise and Medhi were both hard-selling quests they’d found.

“Whoops, continued intermittent dizziness!”

Shiraaase’s perpendicular assault on the quest board continued, a fresh posting torn off in each hand. It would take an act of God for her to release those now.

The kids were starting to get the picture.

“...Shiraaase, what’s your goal here? Just say it.”

“Do you not want us picking?”

“Is there a problem with us getting a moment to shine?”

“I’m sure I don’t have the foggiest. I merely felt unsteady on my feet, causing a shower of concern! My actions are beyond reproach.”

“So you refuse to admit it. Fine. Medhi, shall we?” *Crack, crack.*

“You take the left, I’ll take the right.” *Loooom.*

“Wise, Medhi, we’re filming! Violence is not the answer! Forbear, forbear!”

Wise had veins popping and knuckles cracking. Medhi was letting her inner darkness gush out. Both moving grimly in Shiraaase's direction.

Both hell-bent on seizing the limelight, no matter the risk.

This was still not enough to make Shiraaase look alarmed, but there was a bead of sweat running down her cheek.

"Oh, what's this?"

Mamako and Porta had been poring over the board together, and one posting had caught their attention.

It read: EXPLORE THE WET 'N' WILD WETLANDS.

"This is a field exploration quest! A very simple one, meant for beginners! Mama, what makes you interested?"

"Well, look here, at the very edge! It's a bit small, but..."

"Where? Oh...hnggg..."

Porta used her Appraise skill to examine it carefully.

At the edge of the posting, in letters so small they were barely the size of a rice kernel, it read: MA-KUN

"Whoa! It's got your name, Masato! Gosh, Mama! I didn't even see that until you pointed it out!"

"Hee-hee. If it's Ma-kun, I'll always know, no matter how small it is. I'm his mommy! And this must mean something. I think we should take this quest. Right, Ma-kun?"

Mamako held up the posting, smiling broadly.

Masato glared at Shiraaase.

"...Shiraaase, very clever of you to take my mom's proclivities into account. So this is all part of your scheme?"

"No idea what you could mean. But it seems Mamako has her mind made up! Why not go along with it? ...Oh, coincidentally I happen to have a map of the Wet 'n' Wild Wetlands right here."

“Clearly not a coincidence...”

The Hero’s party had accepted a quest dubious beyond all doubt!

They took the transport circle from Catharn to the nearest inn town. From there, it was a ten-minute walk.

It was a broad marsh, covered in some sort of reed. Didn’t seem that wild.

“How lovely! The water seems quite clean. Perfect for children to play in!”

“Indeed, but this is a ‘field,’ which means monsters spawn on it, and I can infoorm you it is quite unfit for unaccompanied children. As my name is Shiraaase!”

“Oh dear! Then make sure you stay close to Mommy! Come, Ma-kun!”

“Get real.”

Masato gently ignored Mamako’s outstretched hand, walking to the front.

Leading into the swamp was a mazelike network of wooden paths.

Their footsteps made merry *tonk tonk tonks*.

“This is just a promenade... Porta, field exploration quests are basically ‘fill in the map,’ right?”

“Yes! The quest says to walk through the indicated areas!”

Several sections of the map in Porta’s hands were obscured, and they were revealed as the party walked through the area.

Once they hit the target percentage, the quest would be complete.

“This is like baby’s first quest, and I’m already—*yawn*—see? Boooring!”

“Wise, I don’t disagree, but don’t let your guard down. There are monsters and...”

Medhi gave Shiraaase a sidelong glance.

Shiraaase looked offended. She shook her head. “So suspicious! I admit, I did cajole you into taking this quest, but I can infoorm you that was merely because the shoot required it.”

“Can we ask the reason?” said Medhi.

“Simple. We’re making a commercial. And the intended message is that anyone can join in and enjoy themselves. Which is why...”

“Uh, if the quest isn’t easy, people will think the game is too hard for them?” asked Wise.

“Precisely. And that would get us nowhere.”

“So if we wind up shrieking in horror, or frustrated and raging—that would be bad for marketing, so you’d have to scrap the footage?” asked Masato.

“Naturally. We are now an information society, and net literacy is on the rise. We must be conscious of anything that could cause a backlash, and take pains to avoid it.”

Clear reasoning and firm guidelines. Definitely easing their suspicions.

“In that case, I guess we can trust you. We’ll focus on the task at hand,” said Masato. “Everyone agree?”

“Yep. Combat’s always the Mamako show. But we can’t let her hog all the glory today. Let’s make sure we all get a turn!”

“Let’s vow to work together as a party and get through this together.” Medhi smiled.

“Few things are less trustworthy than Medhi’s smile...”

“I sure don’t trust it at all.”

“Heh-heh-heh. How rude.” *Grind, grind.*

Medhi’s smiles always *looked* beautiful, but Masato and Wise knew better. Voicing this suspicion earned them each a foot stomp.

“Oh! There’s something out there! I see it moving!” Porta called.

She was pointing out the water off the wooden path.

The water was only a few feet deep, but something oblong and transparent was swimming through it.

“Oh, you’re right! What is that—eek?!”

Mamako had stepped over to the edge of the path, peering in—and the

creature suddenly sprayed water all over her.

She was drenched. Her dress clung to her...and you could clearly see her underwear through it.

“Oh dear! It sprayed me with water! Mommy’s positively dripping! Ma-kun, Mommy’s all wet!”

“Stop telling me these things! And keep your distance! ...Porta, towel for Mom!”

“Okay! Leave that to me!”

“You plan to dry her? Seems a shame...”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Shiraaase! Help her!”

Letting Porta and Shiraaase restore Mamako to a viewable condition, careful to keep his own gaze elsewhere...

Masato put a hand on his blade, watching the water.

“What was that thing? A monster?”

“I dunno, but probably? There’s gotta be some here.”

“Then was that splash an attack? Mamako took no damage from it...”

Wise and Medhi joined him, scanning the water for movement.

There was a splash behind them. The thing had popped up on the other side of the path.

It was bluish, see-through, and the size of a watermelon—a slime.

“It *was* a monster! Right, Wise, you’re up!”

“This one’s all yours, Wise! Take it away.”

“What, you’re both letting me take the lead? Nice! ...Uh, wait.”

They’d each grabbed an arm, physically pushing her to the front.

The slime attacked. Its whole body quivered, and the air around it shook.

Masato was unaffected. Medhi used a spell to prevent status ailments.

Wise’s magic was sealed!

“What...the...?! Masato! Medhi! Why would you do this?!”

“Blame the slime. Not our fault! And thus, we’ve got one less competitor. Still...it *is* a slime.”

“Rather difficult to show off with. It seems...incredibly lacking.”

Neither Masato nor Medhi were exactly thrilled about this fight.

But the slime was super into it! It swelled itself up, menacing—

“Ma-kun, thanks for waiting. I wiped everything down, so I’m okay...eek!”

As Mamako ran up, the slime immediately sprayed her again!

Mamako was drenched again! Those clothes clinging to her, her underwear clearly visible once more! Wet and see-through!

“Oh dear! Again? Ma-kun, Mommy’s all wet!”

“I don’t need to know! Glad you tried to pitch in, but better retreat for now!”

“Hmm? Mommy’s just fine. I’m certainly wet, but I’m not at all hurt.”

“Seeing you like this will do untold damage to your son’s psyche! About-face! Quick march!”

He pushed Mamako away, back to Porta and Shiraaase, who had towels ready. Pit stop!

“Masato, if you’re done, get back here!”

“This isn’t going well!”

“What, really?”

Slime after slime was popping out of the water. Wise was kicking them, and Medhi swinging her staff, but they couldn’t keep up—the numbers kept increasing.

In the blink of an eye, the path was covered in slimes.

“This many slimes, all of them only after Mom... Yikes, this could be real bad news.”

“This is gonna be like our first dungeon trip: You and Mamako in an awkward predicament,” said Wise.

“I’ve heard the stories,” said Medhi. “If that happens again and is captured on film, broadcast to the world...”

“It’d be the end of the Oosukis! Right—Wise, Medhi! Lend me your strength! Defend my family! Defend my mother!”

“Oh-ho? You, proposing we defend Mamako? With no reluctance at all? Very well. I’ll show you what I can really do!”

“If our party’s in danger, we can’t waste time jostling for the spotlight. Time to unleash my full strength.”

“Great! Go for it.”

Masato placed himself between the slimes and Mamako, drawing the Holy Sword, Firmamento.

His mother had a hand clasped to her mouth, touched by this defense, watching her heroic son battle!

“Wise, we can’t leave your magic sealed. *Spara la magia per mirare... Rilascio!*”

“Thanks, Medhi! Okay—Masato, watch this! ...*Spara la magia per mirare... Forte Vento!*”

“Nice combo! You’re actually impressing me here!”

Wise’s spell activated. A gale-force wind sent the slimes flying into the upper atmosphere.

Masato unobtrusively fixed the hair that wind had tousled.

“Let’s finish them off before they fuse and things get *dire*! I’m Masato, the Hero chosen by the heavens! Enemies in the air are miiiiiiiine!”

He swung his sword with all his might. The power of the heavens hidden within let out a massive shock wave.

It homed in on the enemies, arcing through the air, and cut a single slime in two!

“See? How’d you like that?!”

“Incredible single-target attack.” *Clap, clap.*

“You certainly showed that singular slime a lesson.” *Clap, clap.*

“Accurate statements, but I can sense the spite! I hate you both, too.”

A single gem (exchangeable for money) fell from the defeated slime in front of Masato. Just the one. It looked lonely.

“Well, enough generosity! Now it’s time for the Ultimate Sage, me, to shine! I’ll finish ’em all off with my magic!”

“We’ll see about that. Don’t forget, you have here a special Cleric who’s overcome the limitations of the healer role.”

Wise had her magic tome out, but Medhi jumped in front of her. “Hey!” “Pardon me.” And charged in. As the slimes fell back to earth, she began swinging her staff. A series of satisfying cracks. All home runs!

“Wow, impressive swing. You totally flattened all of those.”

“Blunt force trauma is not my only weapon! ...*Spara la magia per mirare... Morte!*”

The pure white Cleric cast an instant death spell. The reaper’s shadow sped into the sky, snatching the lives from slime after slime.

“This is going quite well. At this rate, we don’t need Wise... Wait, who is Wise? Did we know a Wise? The memories...they’re fading away...”

“Don’t go forgetting about me! I’m right here! ...*Spara la magia per mirare... Fuoco Fiamma! And! Fuoco Fiamma!*”

Wise’s chain-casting ability allowed two spells to activate back-to-back. Blazing infernos shot upward, roasting slimes.

When the flames died down and the sky was blue again, gems rained down. No slimes were left.

The slime swarm was defeated!

“Yes, we win! If we rank us by the power of individual blows, I win! I know it.”

“Sure, sure, Masato...we’ll go with that,” said Wise.

“Now it’s time for our cute little industrious worker,” added Medhi.

“Gathering gems is my job! Leave it to me!”

With the battle over, Porta began darting around, gathering all the gems on the planks. Like a squirrel gathering nuts. Adorable.

“Ma-kun! Wise, and Medhi, too. You all were great! It was lovely to watch.”

“And Mom didn’t jump in front but watched from behind, complimenting our efforts at the end! Yes! That’s how the Hero’s party should be. This is the truth! No lies here. Right, every...one...?”

Satisfied with this ideal battle, Masato turned around...

And saw a giant slime looming behind Mamako, the size of a small hill.

There was someone’s coffin inside it already, but no matter.

“Wha—when did that...?! Uh, bad news! I’m getting déjà vu!”

“Mamako! Behind you! Look behind you!”

“Mama! Turn around! Hurry!”

“Something behind—? Oh no, I’m not falling for that! Hee-hee!”

“It’s not a trick! Hurry up or...aughh!!”

Too late.

The giant slime spat mystery fluid, and Mamako was instantly coated in it.

It didn’t harm her skin or hair—but her clothes melted right off. The dress—gone. Bare skin everywhere.

“Noooooooooooooooooo?! Er, wait...a swimsuit?”

Her armor and weapons remained, and under that...bikini mom.

“Shiraaase said it was anti-slime equipment, in case of unfortunate accidents.”

“So *that’s* why you changed before we left the inn. All part of her plan? Geez.”

“And now it’s time for Mommy to fight!”

Mamako smiled and turned to face the giant slime.

It flinched—a note of fear. A shrill noise like an alarm sounded. Smaller slimes

appeared from all across the swamp, gathering around the giant one.

Clearly trying to fuse them all and power up.

“Do slimes not have a phone tree for emergencies? I told them before, this sort of behavior is very naughty!”

In her right hand, the scorching red Holy Sword of Earth, Terra di Madre.

In her left hand, the deep blue Holy Sword of the Ocean, Altura.

She gripped their hilts tightly.

“Only bad monsters make Mommy strip! You need to be punished! Hyah!”

Mamako attacked!

One swing of Terra di Madre, and rock spikes shot out of the earth!

One swing of Altura, and countless water bullets fired!

The giant slime and all the little slimes were hit hard by the two-hit multi-target attack.

All were sliced apart! Impaled! In the blink of an eye, there were no monsters left! To celebrate the victory, a rain of gems glittered!

Mommy defeated the boss of the Wet 'n' Wild Wetlands!

Porta was running around gathering all the gems. And the three teens, their glory snatched away...looked a bit crestfallen.

Still...



“I knew Mamako would come in at the end. But...at least I got a turn! There’s still hope!”

“I’m proud of my contributions. I’m sure I’ll be in the commercial as the true heroine.”

“We did what we could. The rest is in the hands of those above... O Heavens! I’m the Hero you chose! Help me out here!”

With hope in their hearts, faith in an idealized future, they failed to hear the quiet chuckle from the gem-buried coffin.

A few days after the filmed quest, Shiraaase sent them a letter.

An invitation to a test screening for the completed commercial.

“Medhi, is my hair all right? Anything out of place?”

“I doubt anyone will notice if it is. You’re still Wise.”

“God, so mean. ‘Kay, that means I get to borrow your lipstick. Wait, this is mine!”

“Yo, girls, knock it off. It’s time to go!”

The girls were paying extra-close attention to their appearance...and had been at it for two hours, so Masato had to drag them from the inn.

The screening was in a public auditorium in Catharn. A big building, like a temple, with a line of guests outside. Villagers, adventures—well over a hundred.

“It’s open to the public? Yikes, now I’m nervous.”

“Me too! Oohhh...”

“All we’re doing is watching it together! Let’s relax and enjoy it! Whoo!”

Mamako was her usual self and led the way to the staff entrance, which opened into the lobby.

It felt like everyone here was staring at them...and just as that was getting unbearable, Shiraaase arrived.

“Thank you for taking the time to join us here. Your contributions have

allowed us to create a true masterpiece. Please enjoy.”

“G-great...”

Even Shiraaase was making them nervous somehow. They took seats at the back of the theater.

Shiraaase, Masato, Mamako, Porta, Wise, and Medhi, all in a row, waiting for the moment to arrive.

“A great many people are about to see the Hero’s party in action. Can you tell us how that feels?” Shiraaase asked Masato.

“How I feel right now? Uh...”

“If people are so impressed with my magic that they form a fan club, I won’t know *what* to do! Mwa-ha-ha.”

“Wise, never fear. That won’t happen. However, I should prepare a box to hold all the presents they send me.”

“I...uh...will just be happy if I’m in it at all!”

“Porta, dear, you worked very hard. I’m sure there’s lots of you. Hee-hee.”

“And back to you, Hero. The party leader—Masato! Speak now.”

“For the wrap-up? Okay, leave it to me. I got this.”

He cleared his throat and thumped his chest.

“I have but one wish. That the sight of our adventures gives people hopes and dream—”

“Oops, out of time. Silence, please.”

“Argh...I should have known...”

The theater dimmed, and images appeared on-screen.

It was starting.

Our...no, my heroic endeavors!

The adventure documentary depicting the everyday lives of the Oosuki family and their party...

...began with Masato waking up.

"It's morning! Wake up! ...You just won't get up, huh? Well, Mommy's gonna have to use a little morning magic! Mm...mwah!"

Mamako was next to his bed, pretending to kiss him awake.

Only the top of Masato's head was shown. End scene.

Next was breakfast.

"Here you go. Eat up!"

A close-up of Mamako holding out a bowl, smiling.

Then Porta cheerily eating. Rice stuck to her cheeks. Cute. Really cute.

Once breakfast was over, they headed for the Adventurers Guild.

"Oh, what's that?"

A momentary glimpse of the backs of Wise's and Medhi's heads.

Mamako and Porta pointing at the quest posting, talking. Dramatic background music obscured what they actually said.

Now it was time for the adventure! Exploring the swamp.

"How lovely! The water seems quite clean. Perfect for children to play in!"

"Indeed, but this is a 'field,' which means monsters spawn on it, and I can infoorm you it is quite unfit for unaccompanied children. As my name is Shiraaase!"

"Oh dear! Then make sure you stay close to Mommy!"

A caption appeared, reading **Staff provide generous assistance**, and the screen showed Shiraaase looking directly into the camera, walking along the wooden planks next to Mamako.

A relaxed scene of two moms strolling along...

But then!

"Oh dear! It sprayed me with water! Mommy's positively dripping!"

A sudden spurt of water drenched Mamako, leaving her dress translucent!

That was bad enough, but...

“Something behind—? Oh no, I’m not falling for that! Hee-hee!”

Mamako smiled, and a moment later she was covered head to toe in goo, her clothes dissolving...

Mamako in a bikini, dual-wielding, on the offensive!

“Only bad monsters make Mommy strip! You need to be punished! Hyah!”

Two-hit multi-target attacks annihilated the slimes. Yay! Mommy won.

And...

“Hee-hee! Mommy did her best!”

Mamako was jumping up and down, delighted, making everything heave.

A new caption appeared:

Do you love your mom and her two-hit multi-target attacks?

An excessively long caption, getting in the way, hiding the bouncing boobs.

There was a magnificent fanfare as the commercial reached its finale.

The screening ended to thunderous applause.

“Why’d they have to add that long caption? So frustrating!”

“I get it, but they’ve gotta make it fit for general audiences.”

“Maybe we’ll get the uncensored version on the disc release?”

“They’d better! I’d buy it!”

The audience departed, chattering excitedly.

Leaving Masato’s party.

“We were literally just extras.”

“Yes. Rather predictable, really.”

Wise and Medhi were staring dead-eyed again, devoid of expression.

“Wow! I had no idea I would be in it so much!”

“Hee-hee-hee. Isn’t that nice? Anyone who sees this video will want to have a

family adventure of their own! Won't that be lovely?"

Porta and Mamako were all smiles.

And...

"Go on, Masato. A few words in summation, if you would," said Shiraaase.

"Right. Everyone, lend me your ears."

Masato got to his feet, turned to his party, and took a bow.

One, two...

"That was all Mooooooooooooooooooooooooooom!!"

His scream echoed through the theater. The place had excellent acoustics.

Adventure Report Vol. 5

Author: Medhi

.....

*During filming, I followed
Ms. Shiraaase's gaze,
trying to predict the camera locations and
casually place myself in frame...but they
carefully edited around that. How utterly
humiliating.*

.....



Surveyor: Masumi Shirase

I can feel dark power pulsing from
this report. Please, calm yourself.



Chapter 6 Oh, Someone's Here. Who's That? I Don't Know Them... Or Do I?

A beam of light descended on the hill above Catharn's capital.

The mysterious nun, Shiraaase, emerged from the transport circle.

"I'm heeeeeeeere! Hello, fantasy world! ...That's the sort of ridiculous fuss Masato kicked up his first time. Really takes you back."

She surveyed the area as another beam appeared behind her.

A boy stepped out. He had neat, even features, light armor, and a big sword on his back. This Swordsman was young—he appeared to be around fifteen years old.

His eyes wide, he turned, taking in the world around him.

"So this is the game world... I'd heard the stories, but this truly is a genuine achievement. Everything I see, touch, and smell is just like reality."

"Who could have birthed this technology? The world is filled with amazing people. Come to think of it, we breezed past the Transport Palace setup—what did you put your name as?"

"My name? Yes...well, it *is* an RPG, so please call me Hawk. I took it from one of the kanji in my name."

"That kanji means 'falcon,' you realize. 'Hawk' is a different kanji."

"Er, really?"

"However, once registered, the rules dictate you can never change your name, so we'll be calling you Hawk forever. Welcome to the game, Hawk."

"What an embarrassing mistake... Dammit! Dammit...!"

Hawk was already pounding the ground.

Shiraaase gave that a bit of side-eye and then smiled.

"That's exactly how a certain someone reacted after setting up his account."

Blood is thicker than water.”

“What was that?”

“Just talking to myself. Heh-heh. Hawk, let us proceed. I can infoorm you that, I, Shiraaase, will be your guide. As that is my name!”

“Uh, yeah. Thaaank you.”

They headed down the hill.

“Let us begin at the starting location, the capital of Catharn. There, you can begin your inspection by learning the basics and the customs involved. I’d love to add ‘to your heart’s content’ but—”

“We’ve got a dinner with all interested parties, and we need to be back in time.”

“So your stay will be until evening arrives. I shall infoorm you when it is time. Do you have any specific plans for your inspection?”

“No, not really. Guide me where you will, Shirase. I’m here representing business concerns, so whatever you think would help make the call on whether to put this plan in action...”

“Rather than this spiel, why not honestly infoorm me you wish to meet your wife and child?”

“I don’t know about thaaat... I’ve never been able to keep secrets from her, so if we meet, I’m afraid I’d blab everything.”

“Perhaps it is best not to infoorm her yet, yes. Though I may be Shiraaase, there are some things I cannot infoorm her of. Despite my name.”

“As you say, Shirase. Which is why I’m here in disguise, so that my identity will not be revealed should a chance encounter occur. Even so, I believe a glimpse from a distance would be preferable to an actual interaction.”

“And yet?” Shiraaase’s grin had a hint of impishness to it.

Hawk looked sheepish. “Okay, you’re right. I’m here for work, but a part of me does miss spending time with them.”

“Mixing business and personal, I see. How unbecoming of your position.”

Her ruthless comment stabbed Hawk to the quick.

“...Um, Shirase? Why the sudden hostile turn?”

“Whatever do you mean? It can’t possibly be because you keep calling me Shirase no matter how many times I infoorm you that I am Shiraaase... Oh?”

They had just stepped onto the road into Catharn...

And at the edge of the city, there was a plume of smoke and the boom of an explosion.

Followed by another, and another—explosions going off all over.

For a moment, both stood stunned.

“Shirase—I mean, Shiraaase! What is the meaning of this? Please infoorm!”

“I’m afraid I have no idea. In the interest of safety, we should go no closer—although perhaps you will find those you’re looking for at the center of this commotion.”

“In that case, let’s go!”

There was a serious glint in Hawk’s eyes, which earned him a nod of approval.

Catharn was a war zone.

The citizens had fled into the buildings and were peering anxiously out. Armed adventurers were racing about in a frenzy. Every main road, every side street, even the rooftops and sewers, had become battlefields.

The enemy came in all shapes and sizes: humanoid, animallike, even shaped like pins or keychains. As thin as shadows, but clearly very real, they flitted this way and that, targeting and attacking any and all people.

Including the Hero, Masato.

“Dammit! What are these things?!”

A humanoid one was flitting about overhead, taunting him. Masato set his sights on it, swinging Firmamento, the Holy Sword of the Heavens.

A mighty shock wave rocketed up, struck home, and shattered the shadow, but...

It didn't take it long to put itself back together and lunge at him, shrieking.

"Argh, again?!"

"Then I'll blow it to the end of the world! ...*Spara la magia...!*"

The Sage Wise rushed in with her powerful chain casting!

But the shadow struck first. Releasing a strange vibration.

Masato was unaffected.

Wise's magic was sealed!

"...Are you serious with this shit...?" *Slump.*

"Wise, I get it, but girls *really* shouldn't talk like that."

"Her words are as unattractive as her figure. Step aside, I'll handle this. *Spara la magia per mirare... Purificare!*"

Pushing Wise out of the way with an elegant hip attack was the Cleric, Medhi. Her staff let out a holy light, purifying all evil.

The light blotted out the shadow...but it was back a short while later.

"I can't believe it...even *my* magic doesn't work?"

"Ha-ha! At least you're useless, too. But these things suck! Masato! What the hell are they?"

"Don't ask me! Only one option left... Mom!"

"I hear you. I'm not sure I can do it, but I'll try!"

The kids stepped back, making way for Mamako.

In her right hand, the Holy Sword of Earth, Terra di Madre. In her left hand, the Holy Sword of the Ocean, Altura. She swung both blades with all her might.

Innumerable rock spikes thrust out of the ground. Countless water bullets were born from thin air. All enemies in sight were pummeled...and yet the shadows soon returned.

"Oh dear. I was afraid of that."

"Argh, even a mom attack doesn't work? What the hell?!"

“Super obnoxious! Argh!” Wise griped. “But, um...this seems real bad?!”

The mom attack had just annoyed the shadows, and they were all charging at her together!

“Step back, please. Hurry! ...*Spara la magia per mirare... Alto Barriera!*”

Medhi’s magical defenses created a safe zone, and the party quickly dove in. Just in the nick of time.

Shadow after shadow slammed against the barrier. As if they were aiming for record rainfall. Medhi managed to keep the barrier up, but sootlike bits of shadows were steadily obscuring their line of sight.

“Yo, this is terrifying! What kinda disaster-force crap is this?!”

“How should I know?! ...Hang on—where’s Porta?”

“Porta’s safe behind me, don’t worry.”

“Urgh...I’m fine with monsters, but ghosts are so scaryyy!”

The Traveling Merchant, Porta, was clinging to Medhi, her face buried in her back, doing her best not to see anything.

Porta wasn’t the only one who felt like covering their eyes.

There were sinister shadows in every direction. Every adventurer in the capital was out fighting them, but clearly losing.

The enemy themselves weren’t very strong, but they could possess people and make them fight each other. Right next to them, a male Mage was attacking his own party with fire spells. A Warrior male and Thief girl were covered in flames, rolling on the ground, shrieking.

Porta slapped her hands over her ears, shaking. Mamako patted her on the back.

“Ohhhh...wh-what’s going on? Why would anything like this happen? I’m so confused...”

“I don’t know. We had breakfast like always and got ready to head out on a quest...and then we heard the screams... Oh, hold on!”

“What’s up, Mom? Figure something out?”

Mamako nodded gravely.

“I heard today was the twice-yearly junk collection day. We were in such a rush, I forgot to put ours out!”

“Ha-ha-ha. Mom, this is hardly the time for *that*.” *Twitch, twitch.*

“R-right. So many veins on your face, Ma-kun! I’m sorry. That was important to Mommy, so I was a little worried, but... Oh?”

It was suddenly quiet. The shadow assault had died down.

They squinted through the soot-stained barrier wall...and saw no shadows nearby.

“What now...?”

“I dunno...but maybe we can step out? Masato, you try.”

“I’m not the party guinea pig!”

“Then Mommy will be brave for you.”

“Huh? No, wait! I’m the Hero, being brave is my... Argh...”

Too late. While Masato was dithering, Mamako stepped right out through the barrier wall. Dusting the shadow soot off herself, she moved this way and that, investigating.

There were countless black marks on the ground and walls, but nothing moving. Nothing anywhere nearby.

Mamako turned back, making a big circle with her arms. Indicating it was okay.

“Wai—Mom! Behind you!”

“Huh?”

Mamako blinked—and a much larger humanoid shadow came hurtling out of the sky.

Masato jumped forward, raising his sword, but too late for the shock wave to reach...

Then.

“You’ll not touch her!”

A boy Swordsman leaped from a rooftop, hurtling through the air and slicing the shadow in twain. It shattered, then vanished.

Caught off guard, Masato stood stunned, forgetting to blink.

The landing was definitely rough on the boy’s legs. He curled up, groaning for a moment, then jumped back on his feet and ran to Mamako’s side.

“A-are you okay?! You aren’t hurt, are you?!”

“No, I’m fine. Thanks for your help... Oh?”

Smiling, Mamako had started to thank him, but then she gave his neat-featured face a long stare and cocked her head.

“Oh my... Are you perhaps...?”

“Huh?”

“No perhaps about it. You are, aren’t you?”

“Er, you can tell? No, wait. Nope! We have nothing to say here...!”

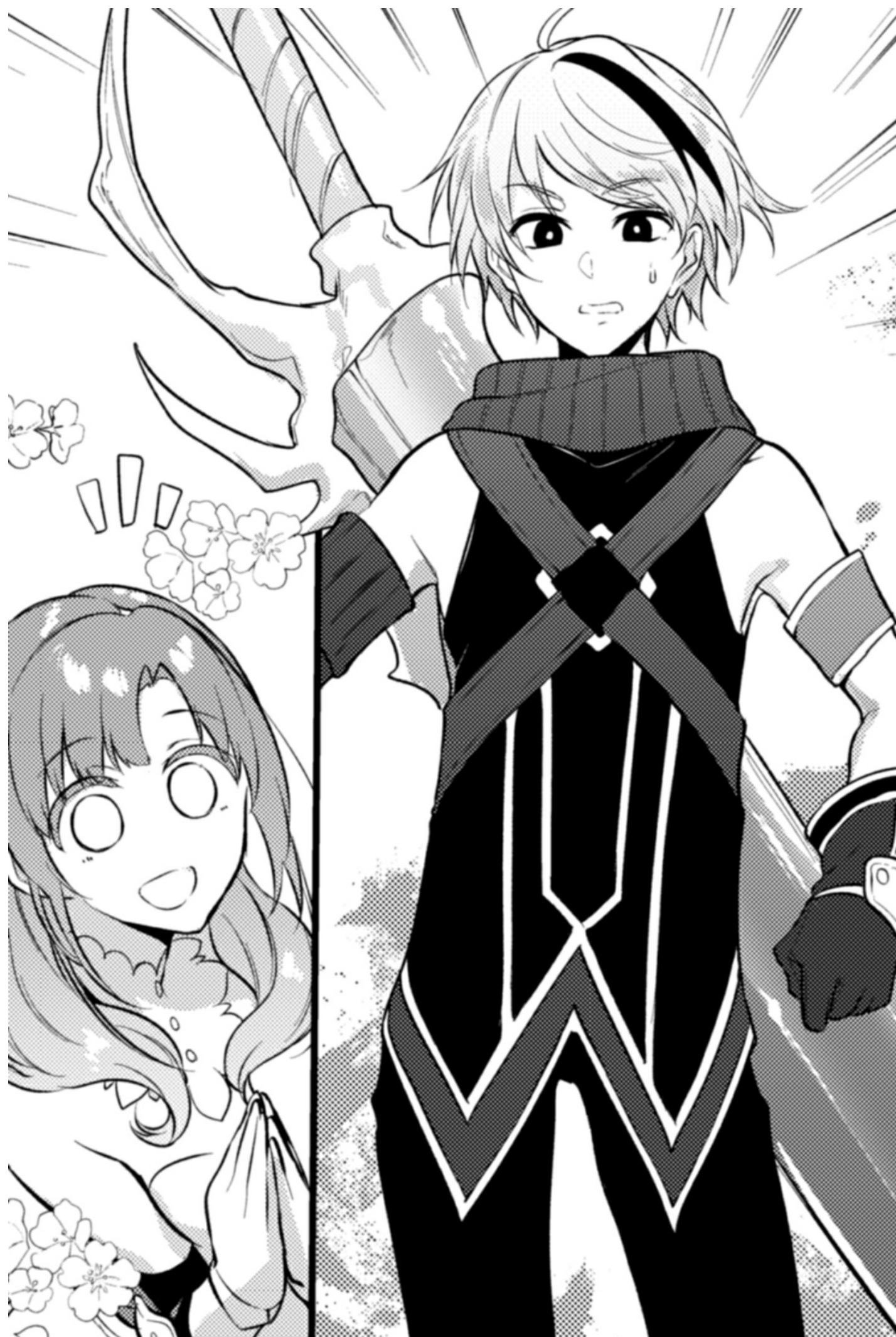
The boy Swordsman backed away, but Mamako kept pace, eyes never leaving him.

She nodded, thoroughly convinced. She opened her mouth...

But then:

“Hawk’s identity shall not be revealed! *Psha!*”

A mysterious nun leaped from a rooftop and turned into a coffin upon her landing.



*

Medhi revived her. They figured somebody should.

Met with a chorus of glares, Shiraaase merrily waved, said, “Yoo-hoo,” and got up.

“Your assistance is greatly appreciated. I must remember not to get swept up in these things.”

“Seriously. What happened to ‘don’t try this at home’? Show a little remorse! ...But what the heck was that? You said something about ‘Hawk’s identity’?”

“Can we assume this boy is Hawk?” Medhi asked.

The boy in question was keeping his distance, back turned to avoid meeting Mamako’s gaze.

Shiraaase nodded. “For reasons, I have decided it would be more entertaining to infoorm you of nothing but his name.”

“Shiraaase, you’d better explain while I’m still smiling.” *Crack, crack.*

“Cracking your knuckles in preparation for fisticuffs is inadvisable, Wise. They say excessive knuckle cracking can lead to fat fingers. Let’s all take a deep breath. Speaking seriously, there are business concerns that prevent me from revealing too much about Hawk’s identity.”

“Business concerns? What does that mean? I’m even more curious!”

“My, Porta. I’m saying no, yet you’re being so relentless... What now...?”

Shiraaase glanced toward Hawk.

Picking up on that, he considered things for a moment, then gave up and approached the party.

“I’m a Swordsman. The name’s Hawk, age fifteen. Management’s generosity has allowed me to observe this world from the perspective of a test player. That’s all I’m at liberty to say. My apologies.”

After that polite speech, he bowed with flawless form.

His body language was far too perfect. Suspicious. “He’s a Medhi-type.”

“What does *that* mean?” Wise and Medhi’s glares intensified. Porta’s gaze was pure curiosity, hoping he would explain more, but...

“Fine, we’ll go with that,” Masato said.

“Wha—Masato? You can’t just—”

“I said it’s fine, Wise. I mean, he doesn’t seem like a bad guy.”

“Well, true...” said Medhi.

“Ahh! What generosity! The Hero’s magnanimity knows no bounds! *Magnifique!*”

Shiraaase had sprung into full-on gush, shoving the girls aside to clasp Masato’s hand.

“Masato! You’ve overcome countless adventures and achieved true growth! I am *impressed*.”

“Thaaanks.”

“Such a transformation from when you first started, and were furious that your mother was with you, and constantly berating me for keeping that a secret from you.”

“I dunno about ‘berate,’ but...yeah, I did learn a few things.”

Painful memories did have their uses. This thought made him feel really mature.

Shiraaase was still being mildly aggravating, so he gently pushed her hands away, and turned to his party, intending to convince them...

“Masato...when did you get so incredible...? *Sniff*.” Teary-eyed.

“I always believed you’d grow up one day. *Sniff*.” Teary-eyed.

“What’s with the maternal looks? Does everyone gotta tease me here?”

“Mommy’s glad you’ve turned out to be such a good boy, Ma-kun! *Sniff!*” Teary-eyed.

“Now my actual mom’s joined in. With *real* tears!”

“Masato, you look so grown up! I respect you!” *Sparkle!*

“Yes, much better! Porta’s pure gaze is the greatest reward! Well, I’m just gonna assume this means we’re all in agreement now, which means...”

Masato turned to face Hawk.

“Swordsman Hawk. Welcome. I’m Masato. Like you, a test player. We’re the same age, so that makes us equals here, right?”

“Uh, yes, sure...”

“Then there’s one thing I ought to say: Thanks for saving my mother.”

“Huh?”

Masato bowed his head.

When he looked up, he found that Hawk appeared quite surprised.

“You can even express gratitude now... How you’ve grown! Ohhh!” Even Hawk was teary-eyed.

“*You* don’t need to jump on this bandwagon! Geez, you’re getting way too swept up in things!”

“Ha-ha-ha, sorry. I was just so happy.”

“About what? Makes no sense... Anyway you’ve clearly got your reasons, so we won’t pry. Just take it easy, okay?”

“...Thank you.”

Masato held out a fist, and Hawk looked genuinely moved by the gesture. He bumped it back.

Then Hawk turned his gaze to Mamako.

Both exchanged tender looks. Mamako smiled.

“So you can’t tell us everything. That’s fine, Hawk. I won’t ask,” said Mamako. “If I’ve learned one thing here, it’s not to be too pushy.”

“The two of you have grown so much on your adventures! *Sniff!*” Teary-eyed.

“Yes! Especially Ma-kun, it’s been leaps and bounds! *Sniff!*” Teary-eyed.

“Knock it off already! This conversation’s going in circles! Everyone, eyes front! First thing we gotta do is solve the current crisis! Look around you!”

The walls and ground were covered in black marks—the remains of the shadows. Moments before, they'd been in the thick of battle and had definitely not defeated these foes...yet their enemy had vanished.

It was clear these mysterious enemies were still threatening Catharn.

Everyone looked grim.

"If you're here, Ms. Shiraaase, then do you have anything you can tell us?" asked Porta.

"I'd be only too glad...but I'm afraid not. My apologies. I have no knowledge of this."

"Even *you* don't know? This is legit bad. We've gotta figure out what's what."

"If the shadows return, we could get pinned down again. We should act now."

"Gotta find some clues, any clues," said Masato. "We'll work with the other adventurers and search the town."

"Then as an adventurer myself, I'd like to assist," Hawk offered.

He glanced at Shiraaase, who briefly considered it, then nodded back.

"A good opportunity to learn how adventurers operate. But it would never do to have you get injured, so let's have you operate with a reliable party. That's my condition."

"And by 'reliable party,' you mean...?"

"Clearly us. Heh-heh." Wise stepped forward, representing the Hero's party.

"Except for this Sage, the rest of us certainly qualify."

"Hey! I'm reliable, too! My magic's crazy good when it isn't sealed!"

"Masato, Wise, and Medhi are all very strong! I'll do my best to help!"

"Plus, my mom'll be with us in case there's ghosts."

"Yes!" Porta said, secured firmly in Mamako's arms.

"So feel free to join us, Hawk," said Masato.

"You have my blessing, too," said Mamako. "Let's adventure together, Hawk."

“...Very well. I’ll take that offer.”

Masato’s and Mamako’s smiles got Hawk to join the party.

Shiraaase nodded her approval then turned on her heel.

“Hawk, this is as far as I can guide you. Your time here is limited, but enjoy it. I shall kick back and enjoy a spot of tea nearby, so please find me when it’s time to go.”

“Er, you’re...going to do nothing?”

“Don’t worry, she’s just saying that. She’ll actually be investigating this mess through routes inaccessible to us. That’s what she does.”

“I see...”

Shiraaase gave Masato and Hawk a thumbs-up, clearly indicating that was totally what she was going to do. Then she went into a nearby café. A woman of her word, for better or for worse.

They began by doing a circuit of the capital.

Every road was coated in shadow soot, and they exchanged info with passing adventurers, trying to determine the cause.

“I’m getting the sense the shadows appeared all over at roughly the same time.”

“They just popped up this morning, quite early on. I wonder if something set them off?”

“Hmm, good to know. All we can really tell you in return is that we successfully fended them off with barrier magic.”

“Yeah, that’s basically what we did. Guess a spell like that is mandatory, huh?”

“We’ll spread the word on that. Bye!”

The male Warrior and female Mage (both in their late twenties) headed off.

The conversation over, Masato set out, and Hawk matched his pace.

“Did you know them, Masato?”

“Nah, can’t say we’ve met before.”

“Huh...you can approach total strangers and even chat with them... You’ve gained such valuable social skills! *Sniff.*”

“That’s, like, normal. Talking to everyone is how you progress in RPGs. If you’re being all shy, you’ll never finish any quests. And can we drop that gag already? Before I have to take a swing at someone.”

“You learn basic human interactions because you need them to progress in the game... Mm, impressive.”

Hawk appeared unduly impressed with Masato’s information gathering.

And Mamako was next to him, nodding vigorously. “Ma-kun’s so amazing... *Sniff!*” “Mama, here! Wipe your tears!” Porta handed her a handkerchief, but it was instantly soaked.

Hawk and Mamako were generating a warm and fuzzy vibe. Masato led the way, looking deeply uncomfortable.

Wise and Medhi took up the rear, leaving a bit of distance. Both clearly nonplussed.

“...Medhi, what d’you think of this Hawk guy?”

“Well...Masato’s right in that he doesn’t seem like a bad person. But I *am* curious who he really is.”

“All that stuff he said about business concerns and management’s generosity... He’s gotta be on the admin side of things. Right?”

“Definitely. Despite the rules stating that parents and children must play together, he’s all on his own...like Porta...or perhaps he’s a parent? The way he acts isn’t *trying* to be grown up. It *is* grown up.”

“Then he’s using transformation magic like my mom did? He’s got some nerve going with a disguise *that* hot...”

The girls’ looks of suspicion (and whispering) were stabbing Hawk in the back.

Unable to withstand it, he turned to face them.

“Er, ahem. Wise and Medhi, was it?”

“Uh, yeah. That’s right...”

“Did you need something?”

“Not ‘need’ so much as...I believe it would be for the best if we could all cooperate here. If I may make a somewhat bold inquiry...”

“Shoot.”

“Are either of you, perchance, in a relationship with Masato?”

““““Whaa...?!””””

Masato’s yelp was just as loud as the girls’. All three frowned.

“Er, huh? Why the puzzled looks? At your age I assumed there would be at least a little something going on...”

“Hawk, sorry, but our party doesn’t follow that trope.”

“Oh?”

“It’s not exactly Mamako’s fault, though. If Masato does something cool, nobody’s gonna be like, ‘Eek, he’s so hot!’ here. I mean, I sure don’t.”

“I am quietly maneuvering for his attentions, but more in the sense of anytime it looks like he and Wise might be having a moment, I step in and ruin it. That’s how I do romance. And since that basically never happens, I don’t really get anywhere.”

“Wow, Medhi,” said Masato. “That’s pretty blunt, even for you...”

“Gosh, girls these days are quite complicated... Ha-ha...”

“Anyway, all that love interest stuff’s kinda pointless, but...there’s one thing I can say.”

Wise glanced at Masato then smiled.

“Being with Masato’s really *easy*.”

“I agree. I’ve never been this comfortable around someone before.”

Medhi, too, gave him a sidelong—but relaxed—smile.

Masato let out a long sigh.

“One always self-destructs, the other’s driven by dark power—they just do whatever they want. And I’ve found letting them be themselves is the best way to handle it. The best way for us all to have fun.”

He meant every word of that.

“See? You *are* having fun. You oughta thank me for that, Masato.”

“Try expressing your gratitude in actions or merchandise.”

“Ha. Ha. Hah! ...Porta, you’re my only solace in life.”

“Eep?!”

Masato had abruptly grabbed Porta and yanked her into the air. “I can feel the solace!” Nothing could be better than her unvarnished purity. It kept the snark and menace at bay.

“If being with Ma-kun is easy and comfortable, then both of you show promise,” Mamako said.

“Uh, Mom? What kinda promise?”

“Courtship tends to be about the thrill of the chase, but when it comes to married life, the most important thing is how comfortable and at ease you are with each other. That’s Mommy’s personal experience talking. I was just thinking that either Wise or Medhi could marry you, and you’d live a happy life together.”

“Man, marriage is such a long way off...”

“The secret to happiness is comfort and ease, huh? Gosh, I dunno what to say there... Ah-ha-ha!” *Blush.*

“Why are *you* blushing, Hawk? I don’t get it. And Mom, don’t make it weird. Ignore her, girls. I mean, you always do, so...”

Wise and Medhi had been through worse with impunity. Masato turned, certain they could weather this...

And found them both frantically fanning themselves with their hands, trying to cool their beet red faces.

“Yo...”

“I-I’m not letting it get to me! Don’t get the wrong idea!”

“In a sense, ‘dating’ is an ephemeral proposition, while marriage is a grounded real world concern, so perhaps we should look to the future and invest in a promising real estate lot.”

“You’ve got parental approval! Can’t hurt to seal the deal! Ha-ha-ha!”

“Yo, Hawk! Knock this off! I’m so confused about your place in all this... Right, no more distractions! We’re in the middle of a crisis! Let’s hurry up and gather information! Moving on!”

“Yes, we’ll continue this discussion once we’ve solved this case! Hee-hee.”

“We will not!”

“Oh? Ma-kun, look at that!”

Mamako pointed ahead at the trash collection spot. Several teenagers were gathered around, looking very sad.

When Masato tried to approach, the group cast their teary-eyed glances to the ground and ran off.

“It looked like they’d all been crying...,” said Mamako.

“Yeah. What happened here?”

Something clearly had gone down. The garbage collection area was covered in the soot the shadows had left behind—and a lot more of it than anywhere else.

“I’m not sure how those teens are involved, but it’s possible this is where the shadows spawned.”

“Medhi and I are totally on the same wavelength. There should be more trash zones around. See any, Porta?”

“Yes! That way and that way—they’re all along the street!”

“Let’s scope ‘em out then.”

They darted off to investigate.

After running around willy-nilly for a while, they grew certain the garbage zones showed more signs of shadows than anywhere else.

But that was all they learned. There was no real evidence to prove these zones were the source, and the cause itself remained a mystery.

Tired of running around, the party decided to take a break at the Mom Shop.

“We’re gonna have to track down those kids from earlier and ask them...but first, here’s our rest stop.”

On the corner of a quiet street stood what looked like a café—but the sign out front said MOM SHOP.

Their employee—a girl named Mone—was busy scrubbing soot off the outside walls.

“Yo, Mone. Mind if we pop in?”

“Oh! Masato—and everyone else! Look at this mess! Weirdo things flying everywhere, it’s awful! ...Huh? Never seen him before. Aha! He must be the cause.”

“I am?”

“How dare you pile more work on my plate! You’ve got a lot of nerve! I’ll unleash my true power and defeat you! Mwa-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

“Knock it off.”

Masato dropped a karate chop on Mone’s head before she could go into Dark God mode. Then he quickly introduced Hawk.

Mone gave Hawk’s features a close inspection. “Never been one for a pretty face, so I’ll stick with you.” “Awfully rude...” She had her arms around Masato and was rubbing her cheek on him, recharging her spoil quotient.

“Given how your party usually operates, I assumed you’d found the culprit right off and come here to figure out what to do with them!”

“That would’ve been preferable.”

“We’re short on clues so far. And we’ve been walking for ages, so we’re dying for a rest,” said Wise.

“I see! Well, go on in. I gotta get this cleaned up, so help yourselves to tea. She’s waiting for you.”

“She...?”

Medhi opened the door and peered in.

“Welcome. I can infoorm you that I am the ‘she’ in question.”

A nun was sitting at the counter, sipping elegantly from a teacup.

“Did you appear with uncanny timing to get us the info we need, or have you just been killing time?” asked Masato. “Hard to tell.”

“I think it’s the former! Ms. Shiraaase never lets us down!”

“Cool, let’s trust Porta’s judgment.”

They all filed in and took seats around the table.

Shiraaase had tea ready, and she passed out cups and cookies.

“...Okay. Well, Shiraaase? Infoorm away. We’re counting on you!”

“By all means. While you were desperately racing around trying to solve this case, I was not merely resting on my laurels. Observe.”

She pointed at the cookies she’d passed out.

“What about the cookies? They got something to do with the case?”

“These cookies...were made personally by yours truly.”

“Wh-whaaat?!” *Thunk!*

Masato was so surprised, he leaped to his feet.

And pretending not to know this nun, he headed for the front door. “Masato, calm down. Take a breath. Sorry, that was one tease too much.” Shiraaase gently pulled him back.

Recovered.

“Observe this instead.”

She pulled a number of documents from the counter and spread them out on the table.

All of them Mom Shop investigations. Records of consultations from troubled homes.

My child won't speak to me since I cleaned his room. I'm so sad.

Mom threw my treasures in the trash. They weren't trash! I hate her.

The entire pile was about the treatment of the children's belongings.

"They've been receiving a great number of similar requests the last few days. Apparently today was junk collection day, held twice a year. And to prepare for it, the mothers did a thorough cleaning of the entire house, and this created friction with their children."

"Junk collection day... Mom mentioned that earlier."

"Hmm...I remember there being a big argument about whether to throw out Masato's stroller..."

"Huh? My what?"

"Oh no, never mind! Talking to myself! Ha-ha-ha!"

Hawk was being very suspicious.

But Medhi had been mulling this over and finally asked, "Ms. Shiraaase, can you tell us more about this junk collection?"

"It's perfectly normal. Professional workers collect the junk dropped at designated collection zones, hauling it to recycling centers."

"I see," said Medhi. "It's all adding up."

"Mm-hmm. I get it now," agreed Wise. "The junk was all left in those trash zones. Which means..."

"The kids we saw there were crying about their lost treasures!" said Porta.

"Yes, I think so, too. That's why they all looked so sad..."

"And their sadness and anger turned into shadows, which lashed out? Is that sort of thing feasible in this game?" Hawk asked.

Nobody answered. None of them could be sure.

"I don't think we can rule it out, but..."

A manifestation of childhood frustration...?

Just then:

“Pardon me! Do you mind?”

“Hey! Gimme back my dolly! It’s my treasure! You’re stupid, Mommy!”

“Don’t call Mommy stupid! I told you to put everything that mattered in your toy box! You’re the one who didn’t put it away safely! Oh, this isn’t the time!”

A middle-aged woman with a small child rushed into the Mom Shop, beside herself.

They didn’t need to ask why. The little girl she was dragging after her had very familiar shadows welling up from within.

A shadow shaped like a dress-up doll left the girl and flung itself at Masato.

“No way. *That’s* the cause? Wait—why’s it coming for me?!”

“Masato! Duck!”

Hawk swiftly grabbed his sword and unleashed a horizontal slash that cut the shadow in two.

It re-formed quickly enough but did not attack again—instead, it flew out the Mom Shop window.

“Thanks, Hawk!”

“You’re welcome. Look at you, using such proper manners... *Sniff*... But I suppose this isn’t the time.”

“Ya think?”

They rushed back outside.

But when they looked for the shadow, there were shadows everywhere. More shadows emerging from buildings all over, all headed off in the same direction.

Mone must have been hit by the shadow as it emerged from the Mom Shop—she was covered in soot. She grabbed Masato, said, “Rub, rub!” and wiped her face on him.

“Hey!”

“Stay still! And what *was* that? More of them?!”

“Yeah. We’ll do something about it, so you handle the client. Let’s give chase!”

“Hold it, Masato,” Wise demanded. “Chasing is all well and good, but do you have an actual plan? There’s tons of these things! No way we can beat them.”

“None of our attacks were effective. I can ward off their attacks with my barrier, but a defensive battle is hardly productive,” said Medhi.

“That’s true, but...I figure it’ll work out...somehow?”

“It will?”

“Can we trust you on that?”

“I think Masato will figure something out!”

“Er...uh, well. That’s...”

Wise, Medhi, and Porta were all staring straight at him, and Masato couldn’t meet their eyes.

Then...

“Don’t worry,” Shiraaase said. Utterly confident. “I can infoorm you that I have a sche—plan. The shadows are formed from the grief and rage of children. They are grudges manifest! Which means we should be able to purify and exorcise them.”

“I’m afraid purification spells were ineffective...”

“But those spells count as regular attacks. We’ll have to use irregular methods here. Can I borrow you a moment, Mamako? We’ll need to prepare.”

“You need Mom’s help?”

Shiraaase shot him a thin, extremely suspicious smile. Mamako blinked in surprise. Masato looked from one to the other, a sinking feeling in his chest.

Mom again... Well, makes sense. I’m sure she’ll manage something.

He might call himself the Hero and the party leader, but that was empty posturing. Today, his faith in her overcame his instinct to rebel. Proof of how he’d grown.

“We’ll go after the shadows. Mom, you get ready. We’re counting on you!”

“That’s lovely! I always know right where you are, Ma-kun! I’ll catch up in a jiffy!”

They nodded, and Masato rushed off with the girls in tow.

Hawk lingered behind.

“Hawk, you look after him, okay?”

“...Yes. I certainly can’t botch things like I did during parental leave.”

Mamako gave him a gentle pat on the back, and he ran off.

Following the swarm of shadows as they streaked across the sky, Masato’s party raced through the streets of Catharn, ending up at the area farthest from the capital’s center.

“Looks like the recycling center!” Porta said, pointing ahead.

They could see stacks of paper, scrap metal, bottles—all kinds of recyclable waste.

Cautiously, they headed farther in—and found a large warehouse. The doors were open wide, and inside were heaps of still-usable furniture. Looked like this building was for storing anything that could be repurposed.

This was where the shadows were gathering.

“They want their treasures back so badly, they’re chasing them here?”

“Which means everything placed in the trash wound up here. Wait...I’ve got a bad feeling. Careful.”

When Masato took a step toward the warehouse, Hawk stopped him, raising his sword.

It was pitch-black inside—far darker than the sun above should allow. Like it was filled with shadows...

And a moment later, horrifying hands reached out from every warehouse window, grabbing at one and all.

Porta hastily hid behind Wise and Medhi.

“Eek?! Th-they seem really mad!”

“We’re not here to steal their treasures!”

“But saying that won’t make them listen. We’d better defend ourselves! ...
Spara la magia per mirare... Alto Barriera!”

“I’d love to send ’em all packing, but if I accidentally harm their treasures, they’d haunt me forever. *Spara la magia per mirare... Barriera! And! Barriera!*”

A triple-layer barrier wall surrounded them on all sides, but shadowy hands smashed against it.

The walls held for now, but the hands were laying on the squeeze. There was a horrid noise, and fractures ran along the walls.

“Holy crap, they’re strong! We might be screwed!”

“They’re going to crush us! Masato, get your barrier up...!”

“No, we need to splinter their attacks! Be right back!”

“Ah! Masato!”

Masato jumped out from the barrier and quickly sliced through three of the shadow arms.

They scattered, vanishing.

“Good, it’s working! If I keep this up...”

“Don’t get cocky! Look to your right! And your left!”

“Huh?”

Shadow hands were shooting in from both sides. He looked right, left, then right again... “Uh-oh!” ...and panicked.

But Hawk came rushing in, grabbed his collar, and yanked him back, then cut down both hands with a mighty downward swing. The fury-fueled blow was so strong, it dug a gouge in the ground as it fell.

“That was close... Thanks, Hawk—”

“Don’t thank me here! Jumping out without looking where you’re going—you’ve been yelled at for that before, remember?”

“I have? Uh...”

That did jog his memory.

One of the rare occasions when Mamako wasn't home.

Masato had escaped his father's watchful gaze and run outside. Just as a bicycle went whizzing by. His father had come running and grabbed him in the nick of time.

“Yeah, I have. Sorry. Won't happen again.”

Masato admitted his error.

Hawk had been ready to scold him further, but his expression relaxed, and he rubbed Masato's head.

...Huh?

That head rub felt weirdly familiar. Baffling.

Hawk was a handsome kid Masato's own age—nothing like his father. He smiled at Masato.

“The fight isn't over yet. You up for it?”

“Uh—yeah! I am!”

“Good. Then let's do this together.”

“Okay! Two dudes, joining forces!”

It was time for some bad-ass dude-combo play, but there were a good thirty enemy hands coming at them. ““Too many!”” They both quickly retreated back behind the barrier.

““Th-that was close...””

“Geez, you get a chance to shine, and neither of you is up to the task. Urk...”

“Like peas in a pod. Hard to believe you've never met before. Urk...”

“Wise, Medhi, you can't let your MP run out! Let me keep you stocked up!”

Porta had them both gulping down MP Potions. Looked like the barriers were safe for now.

The shadow hands' onslaught was getting stronger. They were coating the walls, blocking out the light. Inside, it was getting steadily darker.

"Give us a break here..."

"We're in serious trouble, huh?"

The darkness was swallowing them. They tried to stand their ground, but their fears were getting to them, and they wound up huddling together.

Then...

"Mm? Masato, do you hear that?"

"Hear what? ...Oh, now I do."

There was a bell ringing. Getting closer. And as it did, the shadows outside the barrier thinned.

As the darkness lifted, a blinding light poured in. On the side opposite the warehouse, a dazzling white glow moved steadily toward them.

"Is that...Mom?"

It was Mamako. Clad in holy white robes, like the holy mother.

Shiraaase was following after her, in full habit, ringing a bell like she was Mamako's first disciple. Behind them, a whole crowd of women. Masato's mom-identification skill was going off—every one of them was a mother.

Holy Mamako smiled at everyone as she passed. She and the mothers stood before the warehouse.

"O turmoiled grudges, hear my words. Your mothers meant no harm. They simply wanted to clean. The cause of all this is but a small conflict of interest. Your mothers regret not communicating better. They've come to reclaim their children's treasures. So that they can once again stand eye to eye with their offspring. Come, let us all go home together."

Holy Mamako spread her arms, and the desire to communicate made her levitate. Truly, a divine sight. The words rippled out from her heart, spreading far and wide.

The special mom skill **A Mother's Rebirth** activated.

The desire to try again spoke to the area recyclables, and they gleamed with the light of reincarnation.

The swirling lights gathered in the skies above them, forming a vortex shaped like the recycling symbol.

“What’s going on...?”

“Look! The shadows in the warehouse!”

The shadows pouring out of every window were reaching toward the vortex of rebirth, as if it was inhaling them. Those manifestations of grief and wrath seemed almost delighted. That contradiction was awfully similar to a child’s need for the very parents they push against.

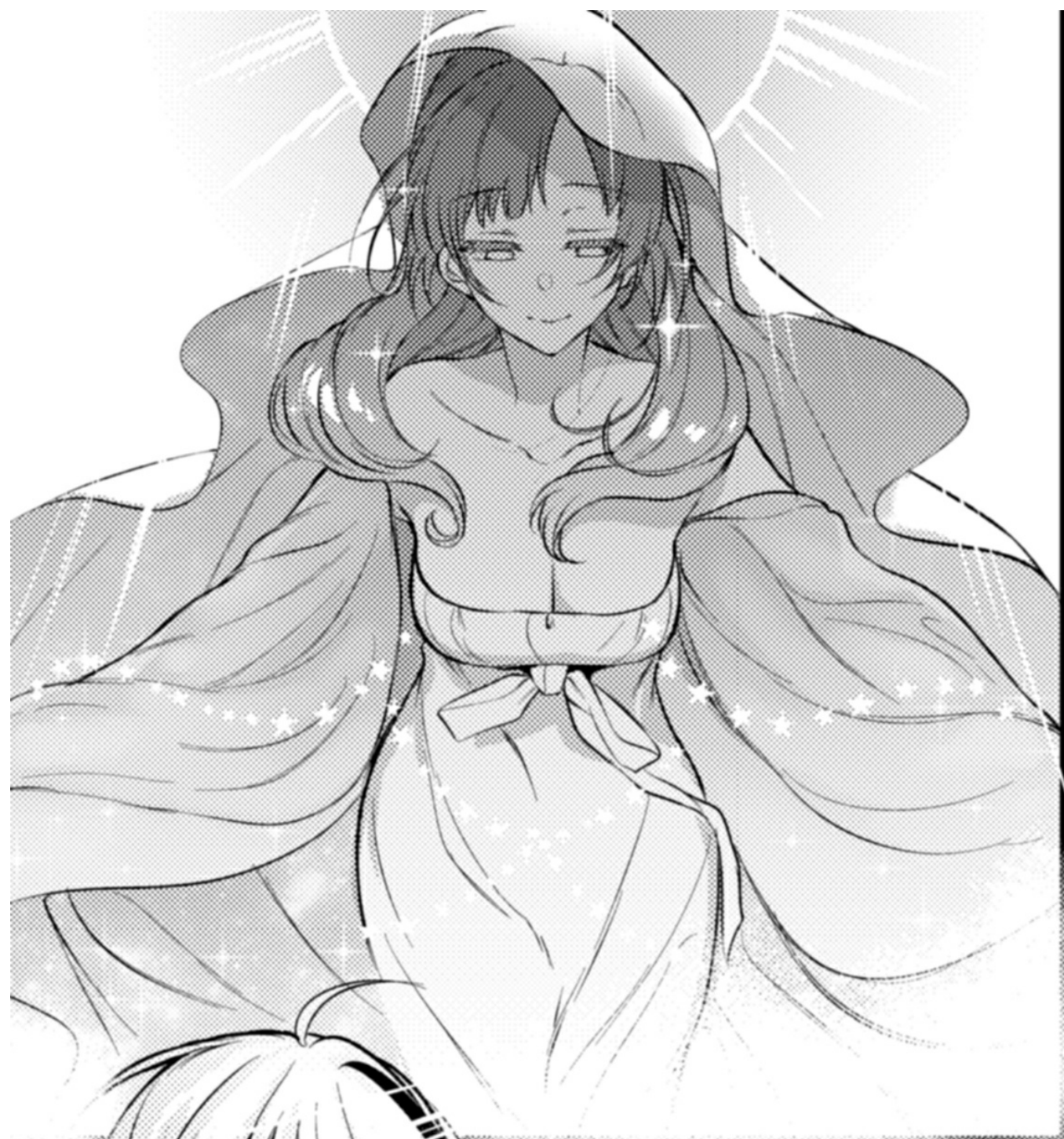
The vortex of rebirth purified the negative emotions, recycling them into joy and returning them whence they came.

Light poured into the warehouse, beautifully illuminating the dolls, stuffed animals, figures, keychains, and all the children’s treasures within.

A miracle had occurred. “““Praise be to Our Lady Mamako.””” Wise, Medhi, and Porta took a knee, praying to the divinity of Holy Mamako. Amen.

Masato was just gaping at all of this. Hawk was much the same.

“Uh, Masato, a word? Mamako appears to be...levitating?”



“Mm. My mom’s basically just...ridiculous. These things happen all the time.”

“They do...? Oh...”

“Yup. This is just one example. Mom’s crazy OP, so she’s the only one who ever does anything, and I never get a chance to shine, and sometimes that really gets to me but...when you think about it, Mom being amazing just stands to reason.”

“How so?”

“I mean, she gave birth to me and raised me, y’know? She’s already done stuff I totally couldn’t do myself. That alone is impressive enough.”

“I see. That’s certainly true.”

“Right? And you know, I say that, but...I still grumble about it inside.”

“Aha...”

Hawk took a long look at Masato. “*Sniff...*” “Why all the waterworks?!” And smiled happily, wiping the tears away.

“I’m gonna help with treasure recovery. Hawk, you take a breather. Getting mixed up in a mess like this your first day in the game really takes it outta you, right?”

Masato ran off after his party, who had already headed into the warehouse.

Hawk watched him go, and Holy Mamako hovered over next to him.

“The fact that he can be so considerate like that... It’s a testament to his mother’s upbringing.”

“I didn’t do a thing. I merely watched over Ma-kun as he grew.”

“Still, you also did so much for him, it gets on his nerves. But no matter. I’ve left all the child-rearing to you, so there’s only one thing I can say: Thank you.”

“Hee-hee-hee. You’re welcome.”

They exchanged looks of deep affection and then turned to watch Masato go.

The busy day was drawing to a peaceful close.

“That’s my dolly! The one Mommy took!”

“Mm-hmm, good! And from now on, you’re going to keep it in the toy box, right?”

“Mm-hmm!”

“Then thank you so much for your help. You’ve really made a difference.”

The little girl waved, and Mone waved back. The clients left the Mom Shop hand in hand.

The other mothers were carrying their children’s treasure back home.

All signs of the shadow infestation were gone, and the party breathed a sigh of relief. Another case successfully closed.

“Now, Mommy needs to get dinner ready.”

“Please,” said Masato. “Oh, and one extra portion. Shiraaase joining us is typical, but you’re in, too, Hawk—right?”

“It would be an honor. I’ll be happy to—”

“I’m afraid I must infoorm you otherwise, Hawk.”

She pointed at her arm. There was no watch on it, but she was clearly indicating time was up.

Hawk looked like his world had just ended, but he managed to recover his wits.

“How silly of me. My inspection was only temporary—I was here only for a quick look at what the game was like. It’s a shame, but I must go. A pleasure meeting you all.”

“Oh. Then...”

“Let’s meet again.”

Masato and Hawk shook hands.

A long shake. Staring at each other, neither letting go.

“...What’s the matter?”

“I dunno, I just...have a weird feeling we actually *will* meet again.”

“Aha. Strange. I feel the same way.”

Hawk let go, then patted Masato on the shoulder, grinning merrily.

He bowed to the girls, exchanged a long look with Mamako, and walked off with Shiraaase.

“So, like, I’ve been thinking somethin’.”

“I thought the same thing!”

“I imagine my thoughts are similar. But let’s leave them unsaid.”

The girls were whispering again, but no matter.

Masato watched Hawk go and frowned to himself.

“Mom, is Hawk...?”

“What’s that, dear?”

“...No, never mind. Let’s get this shopping over with. I’ll carry it for you.”

His growling stomach put wings on his feet, and he hustled toward the store.



Epilogue

Up by the transport circle, Hawk looked down at the countless lights of Catharn, his smile rather forlorn.

“A shame to miss a Mamako meal,” Shiraaase said.

“I agree. Many things shocked me on this visit, but nothing more than that.”

“Don’t worry, Hawk. As soon as I’ve sent you on your way, I’ll go back and eat enough for both of us.”

“Shiraaase...you are the master of rubbing it in.”

“I am often lauded so. And I am not one to reject a compliment.”

She never batted an eye.

But then she put on her admin face.

“For my own benefit, might I ask your thoughts on challenging Masato and Mamako for this final test?”

Hawk let out a long breath and stared up at the stars.

“My decision will be treated as a response from this game’s business interests, becoming our definitive answer on the matter. I’m afraid I must respond in the form of a formal report.”

“Ah. In that case...”

“However, if I were to muse aloud to myself...”

He thrust the end of his greatsword into the ground.

It changed color and shape, transforming into a fearsome-looking magic sword.

“I once received a teary phone call from my wife, saying she had no idea how to connect to our son anymore... Heh-heh. But seeing them today, that’s clearly no longer a concern.”

“Then you’re on board?”

“Yes. I’ll provide the final trial for a close-knit mother and son—as any father should.”

Gripping the hilt of the Demon Lord’s blade, Hawk closed his eyes.

His true name—Hayato Oosuki.

Afterword

Thank you for reading. This is Inaka.

At last, Volume 10! When I started writing this series, I never dreamed it would reach double digits. I can't be grateful enough.

This is all thanks to you, my readers. A special thanks to everyone writing me to say they picked up the novels after watching the anime. Hats off to you!

This volume is a collection of short stories that ran in *Dragon Magazine* (with one additional chapter).

The extra chapter could be described as a prologue to the next volume. It introduces a new character who'll play a major role there—and in a very important story. Look forward to it.

Once again, I have received endless support from Iida Pochi.; my editor, K; and everyone in editing, publishing, and sales. I'm a bit embarrassed to write the same thing each and every time, but I mean it from the bottom of my heart.

Speaking of which...

I was asked to say a few words at the wrap party for the anime. As a result, I was totally out of it from the moment I reached the venue...but Meicha kept me talking, and I managed to avoid running for the hills.

I am definitely better at writing than speaking. To the producer, director, cast, staff, and bingo record holder Spira Spica: You've all been incredible. I am truly blessed. I wish you all health, happiness, and continued success.

And finally, I must address myself—by the time this is published, I'll be well into writing the next volume.

Everything you have done is for this moment. Get to it, Inaka.

Late Fall 2019, Dachima Inaka

ORIGINAL PUBLICATION

This volume contains edited
and revised versions of
short stories that first
appeared in the January,
March, May, July, and
September 2019 issues
of *Dragon Magazine*.
Plus one new story!



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Contents

1. [Cover](#)
2. [Insert](#)
3. [Title Page](#)
4. [Copyright](#)
5. [Prologue: Activation](#)
6. [Chapter 1: All You Can Eat! The Oosuki Family Rice Bowl, Topped with Familial Reminiscences!](#)
7. [Chapter 2: Does MOD Stand for Mom's Overbearing Devotion?](#)
8. [Chapter 3: Adventurers' Respite](#)
9. [Chapter 4: The Anti-Shoplifting Squad: Mamako's Case File *Those Who Challenge Mothers*](#)
10. [Chapter 5: True Story? A Family-and-Party Adventure Documentary](#)
11. [Chapter 6: Oh, Someone's Here. Who's That? I Don't Know Them... Or Do I?](#)
12. [Epilogue](#)
13. [Afterword](#)
14. [Yen Newsletter](#)